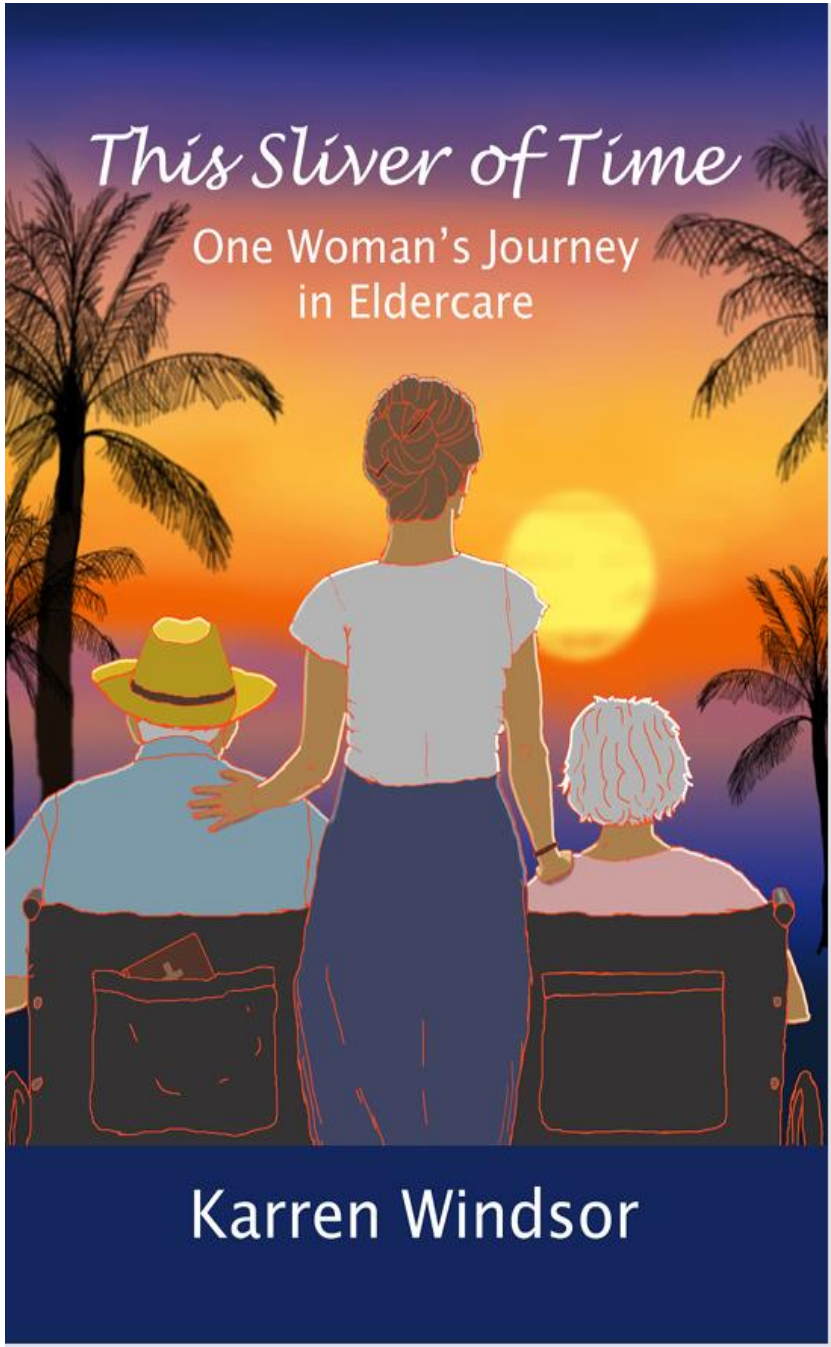
This Sliver of Time
One Woman's Journey
in Eldercare
Karren Windsor

This Sliver of Time

One Woman's Journey in Eldercare

by Karren Windsor

Cover illustration by Whitney Crane

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DEDICATION

To all those in the throes of caregiving in its various forms, and to my family and friends who prayed and encouraged, to those who provided concrete help and medical care and respite care, to those who urged me and helped me to publish my journey, and to the Lord, I dedicate this book. I am endlessly grateful to all who helped me through this sliver of time. Deepest thanks to you all for your labors of love.

Contents

AND THEY'RE OFF! 14
BEFORE 15
OPERATION EXTRACTION 20
July 20
LESSONS FROM A GIANT 27
September 27
SHOPPING ISN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE 30
October 30
VACATION VICTORY LAP 34
December 34
SUPPORTIVE FRIENDS 36
January 36
THREE SHOWERS BEFORE CHURCH 38
MY SITTER DIDN'T SHOW 40
I WANNA GO HOME 42
February 42
TRAVELLING COMPANION 44
RETROSPECTIVE 46
GRAMPA GETS A HAIRCUT 49
WISTFUL 50
SPRINGING 51
BEING THERE 53
QUINTESSENCE OF CALM 55

BEING THERE BURNOUT 57
BURNOUT BE GONE 59
A LESSON IN HUMILITY 61
A DAY IN THE LIFE 63
SHARING MY BURDENS 66
LOOKING BACK 68
IT'S GETTING HARDER 71
March 71
SOCKS AND GRACE 74
RELATIVITY 76
HIGH IMPACT 79
SWEET GOODNESS 82
BREAKFAST CHAT 84
LIKE A BABY 87
BLESSINGS POURED OUT 90
STAGES OF CAREGIVING (SO FAR) 93
ROAD TRIPPING 97
April 97
MORNING CALL 100
THE PERILS OF GARDENING 103
DISCONNECT 107
THE RIGHT THING 110
CONTENTMENT 114
SUSPENSE 117

ALFRED'S DAY 119
TRANSITION..... 123
May 123
THE DREADED THOUGHT 126
EASY PEASY..... 128
MY BOY CAME HOME! 132
A PRAYER 136
June 26 136
DEPARTURE GAIT 139
FOURTH OF JULY 144
REGRETS? I HAVE A FEW 149
HEADING OUT 152
THE GREAT GRANDPARENT EXODUS 155
GOD AT WORK 157
TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACK 160
Sunday..... 160
THE WILD RIDE 165
Sunday and Monday 165
FROM TUESDAY ON 173
AFTERMATH..... 186
POSTSCRIPT 191
SANDWICHED BETWEEN THE PROMISE AND THE GLORY 191
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... 195

This sliver of time

Priceless slice of life

Of sweetness and service -

One breath at a time

Through this sliver of time

We slide toward eternity.

AND THEY'RE OFF!

Pam handed me two gallon-size plastic bags filled with some twenty-odd pill bottles each. "Here," she said, "I didn't have time to write out instructions. I love you. Goodbye."

That was the starting gun for my year of elder care, a year of joy and burnout, of grief and growth.

BEFORE

Up an outdoor flight of stairs in northern Illinois, Gramma and Grampa lived in a two-bedroom condo. Winters made it hard to manage the stairs; ice and snow and knees that don't easily bend were making condo living a poor fit.

They decided to move to an Independent Living home nearby, where meals were prepared for them, their apartment was cleaned weekly, and laundry services were provided. It was expensive, but it seemed like it would work - until Grampa fell. The staff just stood there; they weren't allowed to pick up a senior who had fallen; they made phone calls to Gramma and Grampa's daughter Pam and to first responders.

Grampa had fallen once before at home while Gramma was at work. He had lain there for hours, unable to rise, unable to reach the phone. So Gramma quit her job, and for a year or so, the two of them had kept each other company at home. The fall and the omnipresent stairs made them increasingly aware of the limitations of their condo, and they gradually had decided on Independent Living. But now, lying on the floor again with strangers looking on, this situation didn't look any better.

According to the Independent Living staff, the upshot of Grampa's fall meant that Gramma and Grampa would have to move to the twice-as-expensive Assisted Living quarters – or else. Pam and her parents chose the or else option, and they all moved back to the condo. Pam

and her disabled husband took one bedroom, her parents moved back into their own bedroom, and Pam took on the responsibility of providing the services the Independent Living folks had been doing.

Two thousand miles away, meanwhile, my husband Robert, our daughter Meredith, and I were living in California. Robert, the only other child of Gramma and Grampa, worked long hours in a high-pressure job. Our eldest, Amanda, was in graduate school across the continent, and our son Josh was in his freshman year of university. Merie was finishing her junior year of high school. I was tutoring various children and facilitating Merie in her adventures of playing water polo, learning to drive, being president of her Venture Crew (a version of Boy Scouts), and, of course, school and friends.

One June day, Pam called me, sick with pneumonia, and asked, Could I please take her parents? Since Robert is her only sibling, and since I had suggested many times that we help, I was glad to take on the responsibility.

My friend Laura Jo is a nurse practitioner, so when she heard that the grandparents would be moving in, she came over to see our living arrangement to advise us on how to accommodate seniors with things like handrails around the toilet and in the shower. Her husband David completed his self-assigned task of building manageable access from our study up four steps to the living room and kitchen level of the house.

The ground floor study, which had walkout French doors to the garden, a large closet, and an adjoining bathroom, would be perfect for the grandparents' new home. I removed all our possessions from the area - emptying the closet, medicine cabinet, and cupboards, removing the rug and chairs but leaving the desk and installing twin beds.

The suite had been built at a lower level from the rest of the house, probably as an add-on sometime in the past. To make this space work, the awkward ramps and extra steps leading up to the house level had to be amended to a gradual ramp with a railing, and the extra step in the bathroom had to be eliminated. David made a fully removable platform floor, cut out and glued linoleum, put edging on it, and made a safe and secure ramp from the bedroom to the bathroom, bringing grandparent access to the first floor of the rest of the house. To do all this, he gave us three of his weekend days and refused all compensation (except some cake!). Merie said it was just like the book of Acts, where everyone pitched in what they could for the good of the whole. With that job done, we had a home for Gramma and Grampa to come to.

I had a minivan, and when I heard Grampa would be bringing his motorized wheelchair (large and resembling a rider lawnmower), I went to the hardware store and bought two long foot-wide and inch-thick boards so the cart could get up into the van. I also obtained stepping stools so the grandparents could climb into the van without too much of a stretch. Gramma is tiny.

Grandpa and Gramma got their health checked and started to anticipate what Pam was calling their "vacation." While Robert continued his job in the computer chip industry, Merie and I booked a flight to arrive at the grandparents' condo on a Friday night in mid-July.

Much as we loved them, we had not been with Gramma and Grampa for two years. We had spoken on the phone regularly, lightheartedly keeping apprised of goings-on, and yet they had practiced protective non-communication. They hadn't told us when Dad had his bypass surgery until it was over, and we didn't know about his colectomy or his diabetes, nor about Mom's reliance upon an oxygen tank. There was much I didn't know about their health; I didn't know what I was getting into.

They were dear people who still held hands with each other, who had taken our family on trips to national parks through the years, who were always careful to be kind to us. Grampa was warm, frugal, gentle, and quick with a witty comment. Gramma was also sharp-minded, enjoyed shopping for us, but had stern ideas about some things. She wrote to each one of us every week. Family mattered most to her, yet both Grampa and Gramma had graciously refrained from telling us how to raise our family.

The first time I met them some thirty-odd years ago, they knew from Robert that he was dating me, and that I had an upcoming trip to the Midwest. They invited me to spend a night with them on my way to my destination. They insisted on giving me their bedroom, and they slept on the couches for the night. Grampa and Pam had met me

at the airport, but Gramma had stayed in the condo to bake cookies so that, when I arrived “it would smell like home.”

Of course I would take care of them!

OPERATION EXTRACTION

July

Pam put us up at a charming bed & breakfast inn where we enjoyed a luxurious and peaceful three-course breakfast on Saturday morning: a bowl of blueberries, then an egg and sausage casserole with potatoes and tomatoes, then coffee cake, all presented with lovely porcelain and linen. The breakfast was served on the veranda overlooking a lake, and the setting had the feel of special places in my childhood. After breakfast, Merie went back to bed to nurse a bad cold. I stayed on the porch sipping coffee and enjoying the blessing of the moment. Pam arrived and joined me there, climbing the steps with an injured knee that wouldn't bend, and coughing intermittently from her pneumonia. The two of us breathed deeply and enjoyed one another's company, cherishing each other and a moment of feeling the breeze on our faces before the day's rush began.

The rest of Saturday was a blitz of a goodbye party, with nieces and nephews and relatives wishing Gramma and Grampa "Happy Vacation!" Since Merie was a week from turning seventeen, a birthday celebration was thrown into the mix: cake, candles, gifts. Gramma and Grampa sat quietly, enjoying the company, not really bidding adieu to their home of thirty years.

At the end of the day, Pam returned Merie and me to the inn. I had packed lightly in a red shoulder bag,

thinking I'd carry Grampa's important papers back to California in it, as, brightly colored, it wouldn't get lost. Since Pam still had more packing to do when we left for the inn Saturday night, I extracted my clothes from the shoulder bag and left it with Pam.

At 3:45 a.m. Sunday, my inner alarm awakened me. Now, after my night of fitful sleep, Pam came to pick us up from the inn to return to the condo and await the taxi that would bring us to our flight to California. With all the preparations to be made, Pam had not slept at all.

When we arrived at the condo, the taxi to take us to the airport was due in fifteen minutes. The scene was chaotic, but meanwhile, I had the private, uncomfortable awareness that my underwear was missing. Gramma and Grampa's open suitcases, partly packed, were everywhere. Tentative grandparents were standing unsteadily in their walkers, making their way to the front door on what seemed to them an impossible journey. There was so much to say at this poignant moment of departure, yet what I *really* wanted was to find my underwear!

But now the taxi was due in two minutes, and we still had to transfer Gramma from her old oxygen machine to her new one (which had just been unboxed the night before and was still untried). We had to get the grandparents down fifteen steps and out to the curb, *and* we had to detach the raised toilet seat with armrests from the condo bathroom so we could take it with us. (We ended up having to leave it behind. I couldn't figure out how to get the wrench to grip well enough.)

The taxi came with a minivan behind – a genuine caravan to get four people and all their luggage to the airport. Everyone bid a teary goodbye to Pam, and as I hugged her, I whispered tenderly in her ear, "I love you. I'll do my best to take care of your parents. I hope you feel better very soon. And - you might find my underwear."

Off we went for an hour and a half drive to the airport, while I mentally counted what we were bringing with us: Three wheelchairs – two normal, one power (185 lbs.). Two walkers. One oxygen machine. One bag holding oxygen machine batteries: a total of ten hours of life for Gramma slung over Merie's shoulder. One bed cane so Gramma can get herself out of bed. One large triangular pillow so Gramma can sleep at night. Three suitcases of clothes for both hot and cold weather, including overcoats. Men's and Women's Depends. Framed photos of Pam at age six. Forty to fifty medicines, separated into his and hers plastic bags. Grampa's desk contents including paper clips, scotch tape, scissors, stamps. Prescriptions for more medicines. Documentation proving to the airline that it is medically necessary for Gramma to have oxygen onboard. Medical records for each grandparent to give their California doctor a fighting chance at understanding them. Notes on the grandparents' normal routine, written for me at two a.m. by Pam. And so on. Seventeen parcels altogether. Some items would count as checked luggage, some would count as carry-ons, some wouldn't count at all, but needed extra documentation because they were disability-related. I bless Southwest Airlines a hundred times for allowing two free checked bags per person. We

did not pay a dime for all the paraphernalia traveling with us!

We arrived at the airport, my nerves having grown taut as the moment of departure approached, the reality of my new responsibilities daunting. I stood in the curbside check-in line while a few feet away Merie supervised the unloading of baggage and grandparents from the taxi. While I filled out and presented documents, wheelchairs were summoned to take Gramma and Grampa to the gate. The pile of luggage diminished, disappearing into the checked luggage tunnel, until we were left with "just" the red shoulder bag, which was now filled with Grampa's legal documents, all the medical information, the flight information, and fifty bottles of medicine; the oxygen machine; the battery bag; Merie's knapsack; and Gramma's purse. "Five," I counted. "That means twelve items to claim later."

The taxi driver who had served Gramma and Grampa for years announced he was departing. I grabbed his arm, suddenly teary. "Don't leave me!" I begged unreasonably. He was the last vestige of someone who knew what to do with these elderly folks, the last rope tying me to land, and with his departure I was fully at sea. But he firmly told me he was done, *even though* I had offered him fresh raspberries from our breakfast bag during the ride to the airport. I see now why he'd refused the fruit!

I released our two wheelchair drivers to take us to gate B17, and their obedience impressed upon me that I was *leading* this entourage! Clutching their full water bottles and Grampa's proof of pacemaker card, our group

of six was escorted quickly through security, all except the red bag, which had to be tested. The agent asked me to stand back, and he started digging. Of course, *he* found my underwear! The grandparents had their hands swabbed for evidence of explosives and their airport wheelchairs inspected (since eighty-somethings in borrowed wheelchairs are not to be trusted), and Merie narrowly missed a pat-down.

We collected ourselves, headed down the concourse, then suddenly veered to the restrooms. I accompanied Gramma, and the two wheelchair drivers accompanied Grampa, and Merie held Grampa's wallet and our remaining luggage. We'd been up for hours, we'd been traveling and in public, we were almost to the airplane, and *I was finally fully dressed*!

Standing in the preboard line at the gate, I am composed, breathing deeply, smiling at the grandparents as Grampa's warm brown eyes and Gramma's bright blue eyes look at me trustingly. Suddenly I remember: I have a diabetic on my hands who has eaten only one cereal bar in the four hours he's been awake, and I have no food with me. Ack! I suggest Merie board after us and run for food now. As I'm rummaging for a twenty, the steward stops me and says there's no time for that; board now. So, we do.

We stow Gramma's oxygen under the seat in front of her after we struggle with collapsing the handle. Settling ourselves takes so long that the ticket taker comes down the ramp to see why can't he load the other passengers yet? But now Gramma is buckled in next to Merie in the second row (no oxygen allowed in the first row), and Gramma falls

asleep almost immediately. Requesting a glass of orange juice for him, I buckle Grampa in next to me in the front row. This is the other reason I chose Southwest: they let you pick your own seat, first come, first served, and for us that means we are just steps from the door and from the bathroom. Accessibility to our seats is the only thing that makes this whole trip possible.

We are served by a lovely and gentle lady named Heather who tends to us solicitously, as well as to the fidgety ten-year-old boy by the window next to Merie. The unshaven twenty-something next to me sleeps to the raucous beat coming from his earbuds, mouth open. Grampa is excited about the trip but can't see out the window from where he sits. I'd forgotten he can hear only out of his right ear – the one with the hearing aid – and I'm on his left, so conversation is out. For most of the five-hour flight he can only stare at the wall in front of him, but he's a good trouper and just accepts his orange juice and packets of Lorna Doone cookies gratefully. I alternate sleeping and thinking about logistics. I can't even reach the information Pam gave me, so I am, I realize, entirely free-floating, untethered to any knowledge of what these two vulnerable souls need. But – and I attribute this entirely to God's hearing the prayers of those who are interceding for me – I don't panic.

Merie is even calmer than I, a veritable rock of poise, who impresses the passengers around her by being completely unphased when the alarm sounds on Gramma's oxygen machine. We don't know how long Gramma can last without breathing, so the challenge of extracting the

machine from under the seat, pulling out the two batteries and replacing them is a period of suspense worthy of any action film.

I had just settled back into my seat and relaxed, when Gramma thought she'd like to use the restroom. Her walker had been stowed at the back of the plane and didn't fit down the aisle anyway. Gramma can move three inches at a time. So once again, the suspense was on. God bless Heather, who walked backwards with her arms bent so Gramma could lean on her as if Heather were the walker. I was conscripted to walk behind Gramma to make sure she didn't tip over backward, and Merie came behind the two of us to drag the oxygen machine. Three inches by three inches we made it all the way to the restroom with, I suspect, the whole plane watching us. The lady on the way out of the bathroom held the door open for us, and we maneuvered Gramma in. The audience could see my back, so there was no doubt about what I was doing, but those little rooms were never meant to hold two people. Back we marched to our seats, as I hummed "Seventy-six trombones led the big parade." As far as entertaining parades on long flights go, I think we qualified. I wanted to make an announcement and defend myself that *under the circumstances* it was the best option to be doing what I was doing with these frail people. Really. I couldn't come up with a better plan than to drag them all the way to California, even though it looked like cruel and unusual punishment. And the fact is, seven hours into their lives with us, there was no turning back.

LESSONS FROM A GIANT

September

There is a tiny lady who lives in my house. At her peak, she was four foot seven, but now her head and neck are level with her shoulder blades as she hunches over her walker, inching along in her elderly shuffle followed by her oxygen tank. Her height is tiny by my family's standards, where men can reach nearly seven feet, but in many ways, she is a giant.

Gramma came to live with us two months ago. No one asked her if she wanted to leave her home of thirty years and her daughter of fifty years. There was no choice; it was decided for her, and she has not complained. Not once.

Gramma thanks me a hundred times a day. When I help her out of the van, it's "Thank you, Kay." When I help her into her wheelchair, "Thank you, Kay." I wheel her into the house and deposit her in her bedroom. "Thank you, Kay." That's three thank yous in five minutes. How many thank yous have I offered in the last five minutes?

There are only three things that make Gramma put her foot down. She will not drink after two p.m.; she wants to be sure her daughter is safe and well; and she wants bread with dinner. Everything else isn't worth fighting for or insisting upon or worrying about. She'll eat what's put in front of her and say, "Thank you, Kay." She'll wear what clothes I put on her, she'll not fuss when I forget her

toast or disappear to my room. She doesn't like to be cold, and she usually just wants to rest, but compared to my imperatives, her list is small. When anyone suggests something, it's usually met with her musical, "Okay."

Gramma perseveres. When she can't reach her daughter by phone, she asks and asks and asks for someone to find Pam. She is a true terrier when someone matters to her. Nothing can deflect her from her purpose, no barrier stop her. She will use whatever abilities she has, no matter how difficult, to achieve her goal. When she wants to get out of bed, a half-hour of nearly helpless flopping and struggle will not deter her until she is finally out.

To go through the change of a move, especially an unwanted move, is a strain. Change something simple for me, like my parking space, and I'm likely to complain. But when I think of Gramma's quiet acceptance, I am inspired to muffle myself a bit. The peaceful cooperation Gramma exhibits may bless the world far more than my insistence on what I think is right.

What is a strong woman? Is it a woman who stands up for herself, states her views, is sure that she is heard? Is a strong woman a decision-maker, one who is involved in the process of shaping outcomes? Is a strong woman one who insists on rights, who won't give in, who makes sure demands are met? Is a strong woman self-reliant, independent, capable?

I want to be a strong woman. Gramma is teaching me that there are forms of strength that don't look like leadership, outspokenness, or achievement. Instead,

strength looks like the grace of gratitude. I ponder: how often do I say, “Thank you”?

Maybe I do express gratitude in the routine politeness of daily transactions. I thank the grocery clerk for my receipt, but if I were Gramma, I would also thank her first for scanning my groceries and then again for bagging them. And I would mean it. I would recognize her many efforts for me, and that whatever she got paid, her service was still a kindness to me for which I could be grateful. There have, in fact, been a couple times when the grocery clerk’s kindness was the only sweetness in my day and brought me to tears. Gramma is right: there is a lot to be thankful for in the tiny moments of every day. They just need to be noticed and acknowledged.

So, as I look at what it means to be strong, I ask myself: Can I, like Gramma, insist on only three things in life? And let everything else go?

Can I persevere, though all my limitations rage against me? Though the struggle is painful even for others to watch? Though the goal matters to no one except me?

Can I notice all the goodness bestowed on me and be thankful?

I thought Gramma was coming to me to be taken care of. But perhaps Gramma came to me so I could learn lessons from her: gratitude, few imperatives, peaceful acceptance, and perseverance. If I had those qualities, maybe I could be a giant, too. And how better to be a strong woman than to be a giant?

SHOPPING ISN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE

October

Like one of those trains that is endlessly adjusting itself forward and back to get onto the right track, my shopping experience today was not what you would call ordinary

The grocery shopping trip started with leaving the house along with two grandparents, two walkers because they felt up to walking to the car, one oxygen tank, two wheelchairs, and two bank cards, mine and Grampa's. The minivan itself had already been equipped with a box of tissue for Gramma's relentlessly running nose, (thanks to the oxygen hose), a step stool, spare batteries for Gramma's oxygen (we have 2.5 hours before we need to change batteries), and sustenance in the form of Ensure in case our bodies' batteries also need to be recharged before we can get home. Oh, and our county passed a law making it illegal for stores to pack our purchases in plastic bags, so we also must be sure we're equipped with bags in which to bring home our groceries. We aren't.

A year ago, when I saw my nest was about to empty, I began dreaming of a tiny little car, just my size. Good thing that didn't come true! I'd never have gotten everything we need into my dream car.

I have now learned to expect forty-five minutes to pass from when I say, "We're going now" to when the car pulls out of the driveway. When you travel an inch at a

time, the distance from the chair to the bathroom to the door to the minivan can feel like a marathon. Yes, Gramma used to travel twice that fast – two inches at a time - but we've all aged a lot in the past three months.

Getting into the van takes far longer than driving to the store. Then we get *out* of the van: leaving the walkers in the wayback, I drag each wheelchair out and place it by the door of the appropriate grandparent - Grampa in the passenger seat, Gramma right behind him. I place the step stools, I unbuckle each person's seatbelt, and I brace my arms to receive each one's weight and steady them as they are shifted into their wheelchairs. Now the fun begins!

Gramma in her wheelchair is pushed by Grampa in his wheelchair, who is pushed by me. On one of Grampa's wheelchair handles is my purse; on the other is Gramma's oxygen tank. The oxygen hose travels from the tank over both grandparents' right shoulders to Gramma's chin, over her ears, and finally to her nose. Ready, Set, Go! By shouting and gesturing directions, I get Grampa to steer toward the store's door. He can't see much, with cataracts in both eyes, so I can't count on his anticipating where we're heading. And with even the slightest downhill slope I urge him to *hold on tight* to Gramma so she doesn't get away from us!

We make it through the door and people stand aside to let us pass. Their faces reflect that they find us a spectacle either charming or bewildering, but so far no one has looked annoyed. As far as I can tell. Mostly, I'm still trying to steer our caravan, and I can't even say, "Turn right at the pharmacy department" because of Grampa's lack of

vision. Grampa's good ear isn't hearing so well today, either, and there's something of a delay between when commands are issued and when they're implemented. We do what we can, and we make adjustments. We have acquired a shopping cart, pushed by Gramma. Yes, our train looks like cart, Gramma, Grampa, and me, the caboose. Sometimes, though, I feel like The Little Engine That Could!

Our shopping run is abbreviated when I realize Gramma may be able to propel the shopping cart while it contains pens and a box of pudding mix and Band-Aids for Grampa's everlasting bedsore, but four gallons of milk will be beyond her. We commit ourselves to a checkout line. People are eager to line up behind us, because, though we take up so much room, our order is small. However, once we've committed to a line, we can't get out of it. We happened to choose the New Clerk vs. Argumentative Customer line, so we're there a while. During our sojourn I realize the whole reason I came to the store is because we're out of milk. It is dinner time, and while I wasn't hungry when I entered the line, I certainly am by the time I'm out.

Thankfully our store has a deli where Grampa buys Gramma a hot dog (lots of ketchup, nothing to drink), me a sandwich, and himself a sandwich, cookie, and juice box. I eat as fast as possible while texting Merie to find out how much the garage is charging her for getting her headlights fixed: $100 just for the diagnosis.

Leaving Gramma and Grampa to finish their meal, I dash back for milk and fruit and popsicles – my planned

purchases having been whittled down by the ordeal to the bare minimum of life's necessities. By the time I've loaded groceries, grandparents, and equipage into the minivan, I realize that I didn't buy what at this moment I want most: chocolate.

Thankfully again, Merie is home when we pull in, so I phone her from the driveway and ask for help. We make it inside. I'm walking with a limp and so glad to be home, but Gramma, Grampa and I all agree that while shopping was exhausting, it was also a fun adventure. It was less like a grocery run, and more like a trek in the wilderness, with uncertainties and dangers abounding as we scraped against corners and nearly hit bystanders and turned down passageways we'd no intention of attempting. We encountered kind natives, dubious transportation, and red tape. Our experience didn't quite match our expectations, but then, that's the fun of adventure. It makes coming home everything one could hope a homecoming could be. And we've only been gone for two hours.

VACATION VICTORY LAP

December

Amanda completed her master's degree and doctorate this month in a joint program. To celebrate her accomplishment and being done with school, Amanda invited us to a weekend getaway to ski in the mountains, staying at a house she rented for us. Our family of five would get to be together, just us, for maybe the last time. School and jobs and marriages would likely pull the pieces of our family in different directions in the future. This was a precious opportunity for fun and a great change of pace, and it would be delightful to see our kids relaxing and being playful and enjoying one another.

"Why can't we go, too?" Gramma wanted to know. I explained that we didn't know if there would be stairs; there would certainly be snow and ice; we just didn't have the ability to take care of them in their wheelchairs far from their healthcare needs.

I know the grandparents feel deprived of a special time, but I am trying to make them as comfortable as possible. I interview a local nursing home, asking if they can provide respite care. They can. I tour the building – will Gramma and Grampa have what they need? Will the staff be attentive and kind to them? I think this will work. I arrange to pay the fee, and it's clear the nursing home staff are motivated to please me so that I will think of them if, and when, we need permanent nursing home care.

On the proper day, I pack up Gramma and Grampa and deliver them to the nursing home, kissing them goodbye and telling them I'll be back for them in just a couple of days, urging them to enjoy this break. They're not happy about it, but they are powerless to do anything to change their circumstances, so they submit. How hard it must be to go from being an autonomous adult to being dependent again, moved about at another's whim. I really can't see any alternative to this arrangement, but I know that it doesn't feel kind to them.

Oh, but it feels wonderful to me! I am so looking forward to seeing Amanda again after her long sojourn on the east coast, to spending several days with her, and to having our little family all together again. Josh has been away at college for most of the last year and a half, and Amanda has been gone longer than that. Skiing will be fun, but all I really care about is being with our whole family again as we enjoy one another.

SUPPORTIVE FRIENDS

January

Dear praying friends,

How wonderful to have you in my life! Thank you so much for making Gramma's 85th birthday a special one! She had a wonderful time and was very touched by your thoughtfulness: fancy cupcakes and a shower of birthday cards! I'm so grateful, too!

Thank you, too, for praying for my father-in-law. Grampa and I spent about six hours in the ER yesterday. He fell at 3:30 a.m. Tuesday, and on Thursday he was complaining of a sore shoulder. Also, his usually vigorous stride was reduced to a two-inch shuffle - a very wobbly shuffle, at that. With his complaint of weakness on one side, I surmised he'd had a stroke. The brain scan, however, showed no stroke, and the x-ray showed no breakage. Don't you hate spending that time and money to find out "Nothing's wrong"?

It isn't exactly that nothing's wrong. What Grampa's got, in so many words, is old age. The doctor explained to me that sometimes decline in function is slow and nearly imperceptible; other times it falls off dramatically. This was sobering and saddened me and Dad. The aging of the brain results in the loss of self, the doctor said, and we're having to contemplate the loss of Dad. There's also the contemplation of how to care for him and Mom, and all

those psychological boundaries to cross when, for instance, bathing your father-in-law.

So, I was a cowardly baby yesterday, but I woke up this morning to pray to turn my focus to God and away from diapers. Now I'm feeling brave, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," empowered by your prayers. A few hours later Dad woke up, and his stride had improved, not nearly as wobbly, eight inches forward with each step. So, thank you for that, too.

I am so grateful for your friendship and prayers. I'm not sure whether we'll be coming next week to Bible study. The fellowship is enjoyed so much by the grandparents as well as by me, but Grampa couldn't get into the van yesterday. It took the help of two women to get Grampa into Laura's car so Laura could drive us to the ER. I'm hoping he'll be able to get into our kids' clunker car so that we can still get places. If we can't - or can - know you're loved and missed and you're always welcome to visit. Just call ten or more minutes before arrival, and I'll let you know if it's a good time.

I love you dearly!

THREE SHOWERS BEFORE CHURCH

Last week Grampa developed the wobbles. Falling, he hit his shoulder on his desk, so not only do his legs not work so well, but he can't support himself with his left arm, either. Being left-handed, this is especially trying, and it means he can't get into our minivan anymore. Nor do much else.

Gramma I have been showering since she moved in with us six months ago, but now I'm showering Grampa, too. I have it down to a system: First they step into the tub fully clothed, holding onto the handrails. I help them drop their drawers, then they lean on me to sit down on the shower chair. I pull off clothing and watch and hearing aid while warming up the water in the spigot. Head gets scrubbed, then back, then "Chin up!" "Arms up!" Legs, "Feet up!" Then I assist them to stand, finish with their backside from the waist down, final rinse, water off. I towel off the shower chair, then the grandparent gets dried from head to toe, sitting down once their sit-upon is dry. I finish by sliding the towel under their feet. Now, still in the tub, I dress them again, usually starting with a shirt to help them warm up, and finishing off with shoes, watch, and hearing aid. Stepping out of the tub, they're ready for the day.

This process is not without effort. I do my share of heavy breathing and grunting as I reach over the edge of the tub to tug socks onto the distant foot. Plus, I'm usually pretty wet by the time I've finished. *I* often wear a shower

cap to give the grandparents a shower. I don't feel a distinct need for my usual 45 minutes on the treadmill after giving two showers. Thankfully, I'm mentally more able to do this than at first, too. Bodies are just bodies, I tell myself, though some parts are admittedly more peculiar than others, and I just avoid those. And Gramma's eighty-five-year-old legs are prettier than mine, so you can see some humility is needed for the task.

On Sunday I showered Gramma and Grampa, then myself, and we were all ready for church after hours of effort (mostly on my hair). I am thankful our worship service doesn't start until 10:45, which gives us time for two sets of pills, three breakfasts and three showers. The plan was to try wheeling Grampa to the station wagon (1986 diesel!) to see if he could get in and out of that. And then someone had an accident: Time for another shower! Robert took over. Not everyone made it to church.

MY SITTER DIDN'T SHOW

Wednesday is my day off. I look forward to it all week. Gramma and Grampa can't be left alone, and between cold weather and mobility problems and bathroom needs and nap needs, it is hard to get them out of the house. I mean hard. Even if we manage to extract ourselves, it is an exhausting process. So, one day a week I take myself out.

Two weeks ago, I went to look for gray whales migrating off Point Reyes. It began to sprinkle on my way there, and there was hearty rain once I finally arrived. The clouds were so gray there could have been dozens of whales blending in, but I couldn't see any. However, on the other side of the peninsula there was a colony of elephant seals: males sounding like a plunger, pups sounding like hysterical monkeys, and their mothers, twice the pups' size, sounding somewhere in between. Cacophonous! But far, far from home. It was a deep breath of refreshment and relaxation for me, despite the rain.

Last week, three hours before she was due, my sitter texted me to say she couldn't make it. I was concerned for her – flu? Car trouble? – and I resolved to soldier through the week. By Saturday when Robert offered me time off, I only had energy to go upstairs and nap. But the next Wednesday was just around the corner.

So today, 45 minutes before she's due, I received another text message. I'm not so sympathetic today, because I really need to get out of here. Cabin fever is

pressing in. I have plans with one friend for lunch and plans with Merie for shopping after school lets out. I am desperate enough that I'm about ready to abandon Gramma and Grampa for the day.

But first, showers. Then breakfast. Then the physical therapist comes for Grampa. Then the oxygen people are coming to drop off a better portable oxygen machine for Gramma.

In between these morning events, I'll sit on the front porch and read in the sun. There's always a way to get away, if only one can read.

Robert will come home at noon to take over. His folks won't be abandoned after all.

I WANNA GO HOME

February

Gramma and Grampa have suddenly discovered they've been diagnosed with dementia. They overheard healthcare workers, and at dinner that night I got, "Kay, what's dementia?"

I explained it was memory loss from the brain shrinking. I explained that in Grampa, according to the doctor, it showed up in his having more trouble moving and thinking. In Gramma, it sometimes made her confused. "The other day you knew you were waiting for Robert to come home. You asked me whether he was your father or your brother. He's your son, but that day, you didn't remember why he was important to you." I explained that I play Scrabble and Blockus and paint with them and take them places because when we do those things it helps to keep the brain from shrinking. I told them about my grandmother's erosion. I told them a funny story about when I'd forgotten something. They asked about my parents. They asked about Ronald Reagan.

They decided *dementia* meant *end of life*, and they wanted to go home.

Specifically, Grampa decided he was going to pass first, and wanted to leave Gramma where she'd be happy, which is with their daughter Pam, 2000 miles away. Gramma liked that idea.

Gramma and Grampa have been in my care for over six months. They are not as strong and able as they were when they arrived. They need me to take care of all their activities of daily living. But the idea they conceived was they'd rent a two-bedroom apartment with Pam and her husband. "I want to live with Pam," Gramma announced. It would be many months before they could possibly live with Pam.

I had to explain. "Pam is disabled, and her husband is disabled. Pam can't take care of you." How is she disabled? Gramma wanted to know. "Pam needs a knee operation. Even if she has it, it will take months for her to be able to get around again." Gramma's solution: She and Grampa would move back so *they* could take care of *Pam*.

Grampa envisioned an apartment "close to Jewel, close to Dominick's, close to the Old World Bakery." I gently pointed out that they had trouble leaving their bedroom to get to the kitchen table; that our grocery store was half a mile away, and they couldn't get there. In fact, they hadn't left the house except once in three weeks.

Grampa's only concern was if he or Gramma fell at three a.m. "Yes, that is a concern, but you need someone *all the time.* You need someone to make your meals and pull up your pants and help you in the shower."

They didn't like that dose of reality. They're going to call Pam.

TRAVELLING COMPANION

Not including the twenty minutes it takes Gramma to get out of bed, it is a hazardous ten-minute trek for her from her bed to the kitchen table.

Once standing, she pushes her walker and shuffles to the foot of the ramp. Then there's embarking on the ramp, traipsing the six feet of the ramp itself, followed by getting off the ramp. Next comes a closed door (to keep the 80+ degree heat in the bedroom) that she must open, a one-millimeter door jamb to cross, a right turn, ten feet through the living room, another one-millimeter door jamb, a left turn, and she's on the home stretch. Eight feet through the kitchen, and there's her chair. Sitting down is the last stage, but the trickiest one. After all that effort, all she wants is her morning cup of coffee.

When Gramma is particularly tired or one of her legs isn't working too well, I make the trek with her with my hand on her back. I keep it there, so I'll feel if she's tipping. Gramma doesn't fold when she falls; she falls like a board, and if she falls backward, it is her head that lands first. My hand on her steadies her and reassures her I'm with her. She can brace herself against it when she needs to sit. Sometimes as we travel back to her room I keep up a cheery patter, but many times we take our journey in companionable silence. My hand on her back gives her confidence and security, keeps her from falling, and helps her get righted when she starts to fall. She likes it there. It says I love her.

I was escorting Gramma in this way when a Bible verse came to mind, Psalm 139:5, "You hem me in behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me." I had never been quite comfortable with that verse; it had seemed somewhat oppressive to me. But now I see the real intention: I won't fall. God has got His hand on me. He knows when I'm tipping, and He is immediately present to help me stand, to right me. His attention is always on me. I am secure. I am loved.

Gramma says I have the patience of a saint. I think she's the saint; to be old you must have that kind of patience. Every little thing is so hard or takes so long. It is good to know that now, and when I get old, Someone has my back. He has laid His hand upon me.

RETROSPECTIVE

While caring for Robert's parents, I often think about my own folks far away. Mom is vigorous, "younger than me," I tell my friends, since she is so lively, social, and cheery. My dad, however, is declining. As his memory subsides, I want to capture what he has told me about his life:

There was the time during the Depression when it was his mom's turn to host her bridge club. Sugar was rationed, but she saved up and baked a cake while her kids were in school. My dad as a seven-year-old got home from school and opened the cupboard. Lo and behold, a cake! He thought he'd just snag a fingerful of frosting. Later, when the ladies arrived and it was time to bring out refreshments, there was a cake – with *no* frosting.

The family had a little cabin on a lake. Dad's bedroom was without a view because the roof sloped down there. He thought how nice it would be if he could just lie in bed and look out the window at the lake. So, he cut a hole in the roof, earning himself a memorable licking.

Dad has always been inventive. He rigged a canoe with a sail so he could fly over the water. He and his sister built a large model airplane out of driftwood. He went off to MIT and later became a sergeant in the army. He taught electrical engineering at a university by night while working in the medical technology field by day.

Then, with a wife and three kids and a mortgage, he decided to start his own medical technology business in the garage. And a radio station. He earned three patents, and with Mom started three businesses, earning enough to put their five kids through college. He taught them to swim and sail and waterski and behave. He took them to church and a cabin on a lake. He and Mom even took their family of seven and the dog around the country one summer in a six-sleeper RV. They took the family to visit his mother when she retired far away in Florida.

He and Mom have retired to Florida now, themselves. A comfortable chair, good food, and his wife of 56 years nearby are all he really wants at this stage. He still has his inventive ideas, but it's hard to concentrate long enough to communicate his inventions or to take action. A peacefulness has settled on him that wasn't always there, as the details of the world have become more blurry and the responsibilities have fallen away.

Dad accomplished the good things he set out to do, many remarkable achievements. There is so much about his life, and his gifts to us, for which I am grateful.

My knowledge of my in-laws is much more shallow. They always lived a thousand miles away from us, and they would just dip into our lives briefly for visits or for trips. They took us to a Disney park to celebrate their anniversary. They took us to the Grand Tetons; they took us to Mammoth Cave in Kentucky; they visited our home. The focus was always on the events and sights, and we were all on our best behavior.

I knew Grampa had been in marketing and then finance for a large corporation, after putting himself through college and graduate school. I knew Gramma had trained in a junior college and done clerical work for many years, but that she had also taken care of her father in his declining years. However, before they came to me, I knew little about their childhood, and only about their determined kindness. Now they were seeing me in my natural state, and I was seeing them in the buff. So much has changed!

For all these dear people of the previous generation, who lived through the Great Depression and World War II and began starting families thereafter, their lives are worth knowing and remembering, even if, like my Dad, they themselves can't remember.

GRAMPA GETS A HAIRCUT

The weather was pleasant enough for an outing today. Gramma wanted to stay home, so Grampa and I decided to get him a haircut. I explained that we would be going to a salon three blocks away, and they would be able to give him a trim, forestalling any fussing about it not being a barber. Agreeably, he perched on his motorized go-cart-like wheelchair and drove himself down the sidewalks of the neighborhood. I toted his walker, and when we got to the salon, he parked at the foot of the three steps leading up to the door. When you are walker-bound, you pay close attention to how many steps you must traverse, and Grampa made it with only a little nail-biting on my part.

The stylist was very gracious, patient, and helpful, and offered to do my nails afterward. But I knew Dad must be as tired as I was by the outing, and I took him home. We retraced our steps, Grampa chugging along no faster than my stroll, and were greeted at home by Gramma telling him how handsome he looked! Very satisfying.

WISTFUL

My days of mothering are coming to an end. Amanda is studying for a huge exam three thousand miles away, not to be disturbed, unable to be visited. Sending cookies is my best avenue of contact. Josh lives an hour away, in his second year of college, and is consumed by school and his activities there. Merie is in her senior year of high school. She's in the school play, rehearsing every day after school. With her current schedule, she goes to bed immediately upon coming home, and then she wakes up at 4 a.m. to start homework. She calls, "Bye! I love you!" as she dashes out the door.

I have always really enjoyed my kids. I have loved watching them explore the world, take risks, grow in every way. I have nothing but admiration for all of them, and I feel so grateful to be in their lives. They are interesting and energetic, fun and hardworking, but most importantly, they are kind. And - I miss them.

SPRINGING

All you who are digging out of a blizzard, whose noses freeze whenever you inhale, who track salt into your homes when you come indoors, who wear an extra ten pounds of clothing to go outdoors, who plan your morning commute to include vigorous exercise with the snow shovel – take heart!

I lived near Boston for much of my life, and I know well the throes of February. Where I live now the seasons are about a month ahead of the Boston area, so I can tell you with confidence that you will have Spring very soon. Hang in there.

Yes, we had frost this week and expect it to be "cold" (relatively speaking) again next week, but there are signs of hope. To wit: A ruby throated hummingbird perched in our leafless tree and called for friends. Willows are poking out of their sheaves. There are a few brave flowers on the tree across the street, making their debut before any leaves are out. And I gardened in short sleeves today!

Well, not exactly gardened. I clopped.

Here's the long version. Amanda is in an east coast winter and in the depths of a huge project which has her working sixteen hours a day for the next two weeks. I wish I were closer to do her grocery shopping, cooking, housecleaning, and laundry to help her through this work hump. But it occurred to me as I was waking up today that

even if I can't *do* her laundry, I can *supply* her with clean laundry. So, after getting everyone breakfasted and dressed, I scooted out to buy her clothes and ingredients for healthy protein-rich cookies.

But it was too nice outside to bake! So, I wrapped up the clothes and took the package and my clopping shears and my work gloves over to the post office. You might not have expected the last two items, but there's an island with two parking spaces abutting. Long ago someone planted some lovely bushes which have partially died and are reaching out to scratch and yank at any car that tries to park near them. There is apparently no one in charge of tidying our post office yard, so after multiple resolutions to take care of it myself, I finally came equipped with my clopper. (Merie had a day off from school today, so she was home with the grandparents. Never fear). It took about an hour, and I had to tuck the detritus behind the bushes because I had nowhere else to put it. I didn't actually make the bushes look beautiful because I was concerned someone would report me for breaking the law (destroying federal property?), but we can all safely park our cars again. It felt so good to have accomplished that big task, that I came home and peered at my garden – and stepped in a gopher hole. Maybe it's time to bake, after all.

BEING THERE

"So, what do you do?" people ask one another when they meet. I suppose my answer is something akin to "I'm there."

This week I was there when Grampa fell on the kitchen floor while trying to throw away some trash, and I grabbed a stool and some pillows to support him while he worked to get up. I was there when Gramma fell asleep without her oxygen or blanket on, and I tucked her in and plugged her in so she could have a better night's sleep. I was there when Gramma couldn't sleep and got up early for coffee, but couldn't make it herself, so I made it for her. I was there to tell Grampa his cousin had died. I was there to write a document when his hands shook too much to write. I was there when Gramma needed a haircut but didn't have the umph to go to the hairdresser, so I wielded scissors on her behalf. I was there when Gramma couldn't pull up her pants. I'm just there.

The phrase, "an ever-present help in time of need" comes to mind, but it doesn't describe me. We've lately had bad experiences with the substitute caregivers we've hired for my Wednesdays off, so Robert has urged me to leave his parents home alone while I run errands. This is nerve-wracking to all of us, but I also want to be there for Merie during her last months at home. So, this morning she and I went out for an hour together.

The first stop was Jamba Juice, because it is a four-day weekend for her, and that's how she wanted to

celebrate. While sitting in the sun sipping smoothies, we talked about her summer plans (hiking with friends) and how to get parental buy-in. Because she hasn't got it yet. Then we hit up Target for the makeup supplies she needs for the school play she's in. We finished off with my giving her lunch money for the week, and then, on top of everything else, she wanted my shoes! She plays a mother in *Bye Bye Birdie*, so she needed some mothery-type high heels, which I happened to be wearing for our outing, and which she happened to need for rehearsal today. Since we were driving separately, she sent me home in my stocking feet. I felt a little ridiculous and slightly bereft to be marching across the parking lot shoeless, but hey, I was there for my daughter. And being there is its own reward.

QUINTESSENCE OF CALM

For me, the period of January to April of a student's senior year of high school is one long drum roll. Which college will accept my child, how far away will she live, what will be the financial impact, etc. But Merie isn't like that at all. There is no suspense for her. She was surprised to hear about my drumroll. "I figure I'll get in somewhere, and if I don't, I'll just take a gap year." I remarked that she evidently didn't have a lot of anxiety about rejection. "Everyone gets rejected from somewhere, so it's no big deal."

I stand amazed. When I was her age, a rejection felt to me like a crushing of my validity, a huge shame. Part of this difference in response to rejection I attribute to birth order. I'm an oldest, so I was very keyed in to doing the *right* thing that would earn the approval of authority figures. Merie is the youngest. I remember hearing of a study where a group was divided up by birth order and assigned to make a poster. The first-borns went at the task with determination and vigor and produced an excellent poster in conformity with all the specifications. The middle-borns did a lot of negotiating with one another to make sure everyone felt included. The last-borns just got together and had a good time - and never came up with a poster.

Part of this resiliency difference is also a result of parenting philosophy, I think. My dad's philosophy of human relationships was to require children to earn love.

Love was the reward for excellence. My own parenting philosophy, on the other hand, is that children are a gift to be enjoyed. Having the privilege to participate in their exploration of the world is priceless. And I continually delight in their boundless achievements, because children do achieve relentlessly: they learn to crawl and take steps and read and master long division and apply to colleges and complete graduate degrees with very little parental help. They are so marvelously capable! My parenting was full of respect – awe, even – of their capabilities. And Robert's mantra to them was, "You can do it!" Consequently, Merie has less fear of failure.

The third source of resilience, I think, may be spiritual. It comes from a paradigm of place and grace that I did not have in my high school years. Our daughter understands that her place in the universe is relatively small, that not everything hinges on whether she gets into college. The world will keep on turning, she'll find something to do, she'll end up with an education somehow, she'll earn a living. She also understands grace: that good things can happen whether or not you deserve them, so her future is less dependent upon her effort than on God's character, which is love, and on His inclination, which is to bless. "Perfect love casts out fear." Merie knows she doesn't have to be perfect, because the God who is perfect is on her side. So, she can be the quintessence of calm.

BEING THERE BURNOUT

It's not that there is so much that I do. It's just that I do it all the time. Sometimes it feels like I am physically carrying two grandparents, especially when it is time to get out of the house. Sunday I just wasn't up to it, so we left them home with Merie, who had a bad cold. The difference was amazing. Instead of whisking wheelchairs in and out of church to keep the grandparents from getting too cold, we got to stop and chat with people. I met my friend's husband, and she met mine. There are other people in the world besides Gramma and Grampa. It feels like a revelation.

Sunday after church I still didn't feel like I could pick up my load of responsibility, so I put lunch and dinner on the table for them, but I didn't eat with them. Frankly, I tried not to see them all day.

Monday was my come-uppance. Gramma's pants and bed were wet, she and Grampa both needed showers, there were dirty dishes in the sink and a dirty kitchen floor and breakfast wasn't prepared. (Usually I set the table the night before with mugs, utensils, plate or bowl, medicines, sugar and creamer and get the coffee maker ready so the grandparents can just push a button to brew, in case they precede me in getting to the table). And, as it had for several days, my body hurt.

The stress of a battle with a caregiving agency Wednesday had put me in physical pain, and several days later I was still paying for it. The latest girl the agency sent

apparently figured we would be happy to pay $25 an hour to have her play games on her cell phone. Or whatever she did. I'd spent half an hour explaining to her what I needed done, but that was obviously my time wasted. She did give the grandparents their showers, but that day of respite care, with my being able to come home to a clean house, is what holds this whole operation together for me. When I came home to find the house dirty and the grandparents hungry, I was so angry. "Next time she comes, will you teach her how to make a sandwich?" Grampa requested. Don't worry. There won't be a next time for her.

But now it's Tuesday, and I don't have a caregiver yet for tomorrow. I tried to take care of myself today with a nap this morning, but Gramma missed the chair and fell on the kitchen floor. "I called and called you!" she remonstrated with me, but I'd been asleep and only heard when Grampa's stentorian voice summoned me. I know it couldn't have been more than half an hour she was on the ground, and she wasn't hurt, but I feel awful about leaving her in that helpless position. And to be honest, I feel awful about not being free to take a nap without turning guilty. My sister-in-law cared for these folks for two years before I had them, and she never took a day off. I don't know how she did it, but I understand why Pam called me in tears, asking me to take them.

BURNOUT BE GONE

Many years ago, as a social work intern at a psychiatric hospital, I learned a useful acronym, H.A.L.T. It indicates that if I'm hungry, angry, lonely, or tired I should halt what I'm doing and take care of that need. It isn't always possible, of course, but it is wise advice.

To that end, I've gone to bed at 7 p.m. the last two nights, and I have friends coming over today so that I have something to look forward to. I had dinner out with Merie at Panera last night. I feel better physically, and that makes a huge difference.

What makes an even bigger difference for me, I've discovered over time, is my thought management. If I'm meditating on bad smells, ugly substances, dirty floors, and other disagreeable aspects of my life, I'm far less content than if I'm focusing on all that there is to be grateful for. Thank God I have running water! Thank God for flush toilets! Thank God for warm clothes, shelter, heat at the flick of a switch! Life could always be worse, and, compared to most of human history – and most of current humanity - I live in great comfort and convenience. I have so much to be grateful for. I just have to keep my mind there.

There's also something about choosing to enjoy my life instead of trying to get away from it, and I experience the ability to enjoy my life in these circumstances happens more when others are praying for me. There are days when I'm eager to introduce Gramma and Grampa to painting, or

to play Scrabble with them, or to ask about their first job. Other days I try to do the bare minimum while still being kind. The latter days, when I'm doing less, feel like a heavier burden. Isn't that ironic?

Monday of this week, when I started out feeling overwhelmed, became one of those blessed days, and the only explanation I have is that someone prayed. Maybe it was only me, but the effect was noticeable. Not only did I get the kitchen cleaned, meals prepared, grandparents showered, laundry vanquished, and medicine for the week measured out, but I also cleaned the refrigerator, made a coffee cake for the next day's breakfast, and baked cookies to send to Amanda, who is working so hard! My experience with God is that He is sometimes like a people-mover at the airport. You get on board with Him, and He takes you far with surprising ease.

I'm starting this day with a good sleep behind me, friends to look forward to, gratitude, and a prayer. May God grant me the strength to be a blessing today; may I bring joy to others. May I go in His power and spread His love as I go.

A LESSON IN HUMILITY

I am of a very practical frame of mind, and with my engineering genes from both my mom and my dad, I quickly identify problems and, often, what needs to be done to rectify a situation. I notice what is out of place or what patterns there are which contribute to an ongoing error or inconvenience. It's just the way my mind works; it's one thing I'm good at. It is helpful to me whether I'm counseling a family, or arranging furniture for my in-laws, or chaperoning Merie's chorus of 300 young women with only one ladies' room available. Um, yes.

Consequently, I can feel impatient with others when they make the same mistake over and over. I try not to say anything, but sometimes I think it. Apparently, I needed a lesson in humility.

It turns out I have the attention span of a gnat. On these cold mornings I like to pour myself some old-fashioned oats, sprinkle them with cinnamon and cloves and pecans, pour on some milk, and stick the bowl into the microwave for two minutes. The microwave is right over the mail pile, so yesterday when I did this, I got distracted by a magazine, and the bowl boiled over and left a mess on the bowl and on the plate underneath. I had to kick myself while cleaning up the mess, because this is *not* the first time this has happened. Two minutes is *always* just fifteen seconds too long. "I can't believe I haven't learned my lesson yet!" It can be very frustrating to be me.

So today when I put my bowl of oatmeal into the microwave, I exhorted myself, “Now pay attention!” But I got a text message, and I didn’t have my reading glasses, so I ran upstairs to get them, but they weren’t there, so I opened the drawer to look for spares and struggled to open the new package of reading glasses – and then I heard it. “Beep, beep, beep!” And sure enough, my bowl of oatmeal runneth over.

Tonight, Robert will be taking me to ballroom dance lessons. Not only will I be wearing my dancing shoes, but also my invisible cloak of humility, remembering that one other thing I’m good at is - messing up!

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Yesterday I gave Grampa a haircut. I sat him on the back patio, where the birds could use his leavings for their nests and he could soak up the sun. I covered him with the thin plastic tablecloth I use for painting, even though it is bright pink, and commenced clipping. I have absolutely no training in haircutting. My only experiences have ended by making relatives into sworn enemies. But Grampa wasn't in a position to argue, and Gramma said he looked "handsome" when I was done. I'm pretty sure the "handsome" was in quotes.

I chatted on the phone with Amanda as she drove to her two-day exam for which she's been studying since Christmas. She has incredible willpower, making herself stay on task and study for sixteen hours a day, seven days a week for the last three weeks. I am so in awe of her! I've sent what I could to encourage her in her studies, but there is one area in which I let her down. My exam food is peanut M&Ms for the combination of protein and sugar and a tiny spike of caffeine. I should have sent her a bushel load!

Next, Pam called me, and we discussed the grandparents' condo-refurbishing project. I was surprised she had postponed the inspection of the deck until April – why not today? I wondered, until she mentioned it is still covered with snow and ice. It is so easy to forget some people have to live that way while I'm enjoying spring! A small flock of wild turkeys stopped to graze under the

cherry tree that's in full bloom across the street. Most of our deciduous trees are still considering whether to leaf, but the cherry tree is expressing spring beauty so much that it is impossible to remember winter.

Next, the visiting nurse came to attend to Grampa's bed sore, as she does twice a week. Then while Grampa was working at his desk, and after Gramma had finished her afternoon nap, I got her to "help" me make a pumpkin pie. She is too weak to tear her daily Splenda envelope for her morning decaf, and the salt box was too heavy for her, but she could, with assistance, pour the evaporated milk into the bowl and hold the teaspoon while I filled it with spices, and she could even crack the eggs and mostly hold up the mixer. Long before the pie went into the oven, she announced she wanted a big piece with dinner. The next morning, I noticed Miss Mousie had gotten up in the night and enjoyed the pie then, too!

Grampa also tried to get up in the night, unsuccessfully, resulting in Gramma hollering for us. My dear husband said I should stay in bed, and he managed the cleanup and all of it. Again, before work today, Robert tackled his dad's needs. I bantered with Merie before she went off to school, then I went out to sit in the rocking chair on my front porch, to listen to the birds tweedly-tweedling (my mother can tell you just which birds they are from their song) and ask for Help to get through the day.

At noon Grampa finally awoke and asked for a bucket to relieve himself, as he couldn't get out of the recliner where he now sleeps. Once we'd taken care of those needs, I brought him his lunch. Is this the new

normal? It’s the third mini-stroke since Christmas, and we adjust each time, but will we always be able to adjust? I’m going out to look at the cherry tree and listen to birdsong, and Grampa's going back to sleep.

SHARING MY BURDENS

Dear praying friends,

There is more on my mind than I can manage by myself, so I wonder if you could help me bear some of these up to the Lord.

First, praise and thanks to Jesus that my daughter was accepted into a college, our son has a summer job offer, Gramma helped make pumpkin pie, Robert is taking me dancing each Friday, sweet times with each of my daughters (even if only by phone), counsel provided for my next step toward the working world, and I think I found a caregiver so I can have a weekly respite day, and an evening Bible study so I can be with other women.

These are my weights (sorry so many!) I need help carrying via your prayers:

- Grampa had a small stroke last night, his third since Christmas, resulting in sleep loss, mess, future uncertainties, etc., especially for Robert who kindly took the brunt.

- Robert has a big project for work for which he needs wisdom and God's help.

- Grampa has also had about three falls this week, and my back is sending me warning signals from having just helped him a little.

- Our eldest is today in the first of two days of excruciating exams that will determine whether she can work in her chosen profession.

- Our son is trying to find housing for next year at university.

- Our son is in midterm exams.

- Our youngest is two weeks before the school play's performance, so she will be having rehearsals until ten at night: no time for homework.

- Our youngest is hearing from colleges. May the Lord lead her to wherever is His best.

Just sharing this with you, I feel so much lighter!

Also, as my mommy time draws to a close, I need God's leadership on what to do next and how. I feel sad and scared and unable to lift this boulder at all. This responsibility is one of the heaviest, as I'm trying to do my best to prepare for the future, but I don't even know which direction to take my first baby step: back to counseling? teaching? Other?

Thank you for your steadfast love, reflecting our Father's eternally steadfast love. And I am so grateful for you and for the beauty of the day today! Thank you again for "bearing one another's burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ."

LOOKING BACK

As the walls close in on me and the caregiving feels relentless, as Merie is preparing to leave the nest, and with two children already flown, in empty moments I find myself longingly reliving sweet memories. Today I came across this essay I wrote some fifteen years ago as I anticipated the fun of Mother's Day.

THE MOTHER'S DAY GAMBLE

Mother's Day is coming up, and it's time now to consider what risks you're willing to take.

Many moms who are more risk-averse go for the simple Breakfast in Bed. That's the two slices of rather dark toast soaked in butter, a glass of orange juice with a second trip to the kitchen for napkins, and, finally, the *piece de resistance:* very sweet instant coffee brought s-l-o-w-l-y, with great concentration, by a most devoted child, thrilled by his or her accomplishment of barely spilling on the way to the shrine, Mom's bed. You can't argue with that. Try not to think of how the kitchen looks after their efforts. The whole scene is so precious and endearing. It's holy, really, the way the children stretch beyond themselves to show their love and to honor their mother. And the carpet is likely to forgive them their trespasses.

So maybe it's best to stop there. However, some of us who are more intrepid go for the Gifts, Too! Ceremony. If you want to live on the edge, this is how you do it.

Armed with a tallnonfatmochawithwhipped and your current read (Bill Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods*), take the kids to a store that sells things you like. The size of the store depends on the age of the children. Explain to the children which categories of things you would like, such as, "I need pajamas and earrings, and I like pink." Give the oldest a wad of cash, require them to stick together and check in with you frequently, park yourself by the exit to waylay any kidnappers, and let the kids loose!

The gambling comes in as you decide *how much* money to give the children. Do you wager a tiny amount that you won't mind when they report they've lost it inside the heat register? Do you give them a larger amount with which they can only buy something cheap and tacky, but at least it will break soon? Or do you allow them to be generous and spend as much on you as *you* would? Be forewarned: you will have to wear or use whatever it is they come up with, and you can expect their post-purchase comments to run along the lines of, "Orange is almost like pink, right, Mom?" or "You're really going to like my present since I know how much you like glue."

The fun part of the post-purchase is watching them try to keep a secret. The story about their buying adventure is just bursting from them – what they saw and passed up, how they finally decided on their treasure, what the saleslady said. Their pride in having come up with the perfect something ("You like mooses, Mom, so I knew you'd want this moose perfume. See? M-U-S-E, moose") mingles with their desire for your praise. ("It was so thoughtful of you to give me perfume that smells like my

favorite animal!") They simply can't wait for this dialog, and eventually, purely out of mercy, you agree to open the present on the way home from the store. Once home, they gleefully wrap it in scotch tape and some almost-fitting wrapping paper, and they present it to you the next day along with Breakfast in Bed and a review of the exciting business of Shopping for Mom.

So, lay your bets carefully, ladies. Your chances of getting a suitable gift are about as good as those for winning the lottery. More likely you'll end up with a very large and shiny, garishly colored, sparkly something, over which your child breathes reverently, and which becomes so special to you that you wear it *only* on Mother's Day - and sentimentally keep for decades to come.

Whether you go for soggy toast or the whole caboodle, the best bet is to enjoy being together, making sweet memories.

IT'S GETTING HARDER

March

This elder care is getting harder.

Twice this week, Robert has been awakened by his dad's needs. Last night Grampa had a hallucination that the tub was running over. He couldn't find the phone to call for help, so he became agitated, shouting at his wife and shaking her to get up and help him find the phone. It was in his pocket. Robert heard the commotion and had to show Grampa the bathroom to prove the floor was dry.

Twice this week, Grampa couldn't get out of his recliner where he sleeps, so I had to peel wet clothes off him, hold a beaker to him so he could relieve himself, and empty his colostomy bag. To do all this I first spread large trash bags over the carpet under his feet, collected latex gloves (thank God for the psychological difference they make!) and other supplies, then carried wet garments and wet diapers to be disposed of, and washed down the pillows and chair where he sleeps.

Twice this week – or maybe more – Gramma has demanded my attendance, awakening me to serve her, objecting when I leave the house even if someone else is there to care for her, disapproving when her son serves her when she thinks I should be. So of course I don't want to eat meals with them, stealing freedom where I can, and my absence creates further tension.

Tonight, Robert thoughtfully encouraged me to take the evening off. I browsed through beautiful textiles at our local fabric store, then I went to see a movie with lovely scenery. I paid careful attention to the textures and shapes and colors of the plantings outside the store. I'm trying to breathe in beauty and refreshment anywhere I can, like a smothered person struggling for oxygen.

Last evening, when he released me to an evening of freedom, I walked the hills near our home. It was sunset, and the lush greenery, the friendly horses, the petulant wild turkeys, the astonishing light reflecting off the grass, the colors of the sky all inflated my soul. I felt freedom, renewal. The pressure in my chest was gone. I was my own again. I met up with Merie for some frozen yogurt, and we had a good mother-daughter talk about friends and boyfriends and marriage. I felt like a normal person.

When I start feeling owned, I can think of two responses: withdraw, which is the more natural; or give more than is asked of me. The latter, surprisingly, often makes me feel better. When I voluntarily give extra – by baking a treat, playing a game, acting in love for them rather than duty – power flows to me. I think that's how I've been able to do this for so long. It has been a free gift to them.

What is making it harder this week is the grieving for Grampa's diminished functioning, the toil itself being harder and more unpleasant, and worst of all, feeling a lack of freedom. Jesus' remedy for feeling coerced is to choose to give beyond what is demanded: go the second mile. So maybe I'll go downstairs and remove the note I left for

them to find at breakfast: “Dear Mom and Dad, You’re on your own today. Good luck.” Yeah, I could do that. I think.

SOCKS AND GRACE

We've had a run of mismatched socks lately. Somewhere today, between calling for the repair of Gramma's oxygen machine for the fourth time in four months and dragging a mattress outside to scrub it (I've heard sunshine is a good deodorant and disinfectant), I discovered one of my socks was black on black, while the other was merely black.

Not only that, but yesterday when I took Grampa for a walk down the street - as he clung to his walker I followed with the wheelchair – I noticed he had on one blue sock and one brown sock. And I'm not sure they were even fresh that day!

As appalling as you might find this, do not judge me. I know I am slipping. I firmly believe socks must match unless you are *deliberately* trying to make a fashion statement, such as dressing up for Nerd Day at the high school. Order and symmetry are part of the intrinsic values of the universe, and I have failed. Twice!

Actually, this is the classic "Physician, heal thyself." I am terribly guilty of passing judgment on mere bystanders, in spite of clear Biblical admonitions not to judge. And I can't blame my tendency on the innocence of youth, like my three-year-old who saw a girl with hair dyed bright green and crowed, "Look, Mommy, a troll!" (This is the same child who asked me in a crowded ER waiting room, "Mom, what is circumcision?" Talk about increasing a room's stress temperature!) No, I pass the green-dyed

hair and wonder *why?* I say aloud to that same daughter, now fifteen years older, "Why did she do that to her hair?" "Shh, Mom, she'll hear you!" The shoe is on the other foot.

It is good for me to meditate on why I am deviating from my convictions on socks. When people look at me askance, I think, "If only you knew what my life is like, then you'd understand." So next time I see some oddity of dress or behavior, I hope I have the grace to say to myself, "If I only knew what her life is like, then I would understand." Sometimes we don't have rational reasons for the things we do. We're just trying to get by, and conventions slide away as we aim for our highest priorities. A struggle sifts us and helps us let loose of the things that don't matter. "The removal of what can be shaken …so that things that cannot be shaken may remain." (Hebrews 12:27)

So, if you notice my socks don't match and I seem a little shaken, you can think of it as me aiming high and *prioritizing*. Doesn't that make mismatched socks sound noble? Never mind. Just give me some grace.

RELATIVITY

Of the many possible solutions to Gramma and Grampa's living needs, one I hadn't thought of, but which seems to be the plan, is that they buy a house.

Their daughter, Pam, has always wanted to live in a house in a neighborhood. Gramma wants to live with Pam. Grampa wants Gramma to be happy. Grampa's making an offer on the house Pam has picked out.

Pam has found a four-bedroom, three-bathroom, full basement, two thousand square foot house in a big yard. The asking price is one tenth of what that same house would cost here in my town.

Is the quality of life ten times better here? We have better weather and more jobs, shopping, and people per square mile than at Pam's house-to-be. But our visiting nurse called today to say she wouldn't be making her usual visit until Monday. Yesterday someone shot at her car while she was driving from one appointment to the next, and the car would be in the shop for a few days to get the shattered rear passenger window repaired.

Our nurse was driving in our county. She was in a city a few miles from here, where they average two murders a week and have 47 different gangs. Our city had just two murders last year, and only one gang that I know of. Relatively speaking, our city is a great place to live.

When my friend Lisa thinks of quality of life, she considers that dementia runs thickly through her family, so

she has resolved to abandon the "live as long as possible" plan and instead go work somewhere dangerous once her family obligations are through. Like in the middle of a civil war, she told me, where she could be cut down by a bullet and die instantly rather than have her brain wither while her body was intact. She would work in a refugee camp or something, helping in her small way to make the world a better place. It sounded to me like a good plan while I was picturing some remote continent, and, with that, the remoteness of the event. But now that our nurse has been shot at, the idea doesn't appeal to me at all. It is too shocking, and too close. Now that I see the remote continent could turn out to be the city next door I wonder, would my friend be able to make enough of a difference? Would it be worth the expenditure of her life? Relatively speaking, I'd prefer she withered, sweetly comfortable and protected, so I could have her for the maximum time possible. But it's not my choice.

These quality-of-life questions come up in so many different ways, whether real estate choices or vocational choices or the simple choice between a delicious heart-attack-inducing cheeseburger versus a salad. Our expenditures are all based on hope, taking into account that marvelous economic principle of opportunity cost: is what I'm gaining worth what I'm giving up in order to have it? And our choices affect others.

Pam is planning to give up her current life of freedom from elder care in order to fulfill a life-long dream. She wants her parents to come "home" to the home

she is choosing. I hope for her that it will be worth it. I think *with help*, it might.

HIGH IMPACT

Emily Colson wrote *Dancing with Max* about her experience raising an autistic son. Since Emily and I went to school together, I was excited to read her book and sent her a note. As we got back in touch, she asked about my life and recently commented, "You're a high-impact caregiver, too."

Emily has published a book, and she goes on speaking engagements, so I can see she's a high-impact person. She has an audience. I had no idea what she meant when she said I was a high-impact caregiver, because I don't get outside my four walls. What kind of impact is that?

Yes, when Gramma and Grampa were stronger, we would go for "walks" in the park, where I would push Gramma in her wheelchair, park her in the sun, run back to get Grampa, push him in his wheelchair to leapfrog Gramma and park him in the shade. Repeat. In those times, not only did one of us get some exercise, but folks on their noontime stroll would see our shenanigans and ask whether I was employed by two patients. Like a dog-walker, I suppose. But no, they are neither my patients, nor do I get any money for this. This is how I take care of "wo de xiensheng de baba, mama", which is butchered Mandarin for "my husband's father, mother." We have a high Asian population in my city, and parent care by a daughter-in-law is family custom. That a Westerner was getting on board with this custom pleased my spectators

greatly. Maybe I was impactful in the "It's a Small World" way. And my friends are impacted enough to say, "I'm praying for you!"

Then there's the impact on my kids, and who knows what that impact is? They are polite and supportive, but I don't hear them saying, "We sure hope we get to change your diapers someday, Mom!" My teenager pitches in when I ask her to. Moving furniture, running errands for me, the outer perimeters of elder care are sufficient participation as far as she's concerned. Merie enjoys me when I leave the grandparents and go upstairs into her territory. Josh and Amanda are grown and live away, so they just inquire about the latest events and support *me* rather than specifically supporting the caregiving endeavor.

Finally, there's the Kingdom impact, the unmeasurable pleasure God may get when we act with love in any capacity. "And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to Me.'" (Matthew 25:40) That is my motivation for doing well, but it is a double-edged sword since I often don't do as well as I'd want to for *God*. I mean, a peanut-butter and jelly sandwich seems fine for Gramma, but for Jesus?

It turns out what Emily meant was high-impact *for me*, as in high-impact aerobics which hurts your knees and leaves you exhausted and out of breath. Perfectly true, along with leaving me searching for the meaning and the moral boundaries of this job. It was one thing when Gramma and Grampa joined me in my life – shopping, meetings, etc. But now that my life has been subsumed by

theirs, is that still a Good situation? “Love your neighbor as yourself” has always been a comforting reminder of the balance between others’ needs and my own. But does life have its times when we are called to more? “Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13). I’m pondering, When do you lay down your life, and when do you say, “Enough”?

SWEET GOODNESS

Merie has been in the school musical, so she's been gone a lot lately. Either at rehearsals or performances or post-performance gatherings, her friends and activities and school have filled up her days from early morning until late at night. So today when she came home right after school, it was a treat to see her.

At lunch time she sent me a text, "It smells like spring today, btw." And it did. I opened all the windows of the house to let the scent in, and I went out to the garden and watched a visiting hummingbird make its inspection. When Merie came home, she downloaded some new songs onto her gizmo, gathered up a blanket and book, and invited me to go read in the park with her. What a lovely invitation!

We went but did not read. We spread the blanket on a breezy knoll, arranged her goldfish crackers and made pillows of our books, and lay side by side in the midst of all the green in the quiet park surrounded by trees.

Soon she got up and climbed her favorite tree, an evergreen, and perched fifty feet up. After taking in the view, she climbed down to the lowest branch and lay balancing there, listening to her music.

I watched and thought of all the times she has climbed. From earliest infancy she was forever reaching upward, scaling counters, doorways, swing sets, trees, cliffs. It's been my job to enjoy her ascent and not

discourage her, even if it made me nervous. I've had to trust her knowledge of herself, and her risk-assessment, and her capabilities, and, well, God. It is always a great temptation to keep one's child in a place where *the parent* is comfortable. But my kids are pushing out of my zone. In a racing swimming pool, there is often a mark on the wall where swimmers set their feet so they can push off for the next lap. I am that mark on the wall. My kids come in for the purpose of pushing off on their next lap, striving for their ever-expanding lives with strength and eagerness I can only admire.

Once Merie came down from the tree, she laid her head on my lap, stuck an earbud in my ear, and played her songs for me, telling me what she liked about them. We watched the horses rush around on the hill in the distance, we noticed a hawk in a tree, we soaked up the sun, we talked about friends and teachers and whether we could bear to leave this beautiful moment to go for dinner. I stroked her hair, and we discussed freckles and family and her future. It was so sweet and peaceful and fulfilling. I hope I remember it always. I have nothing but the deepest gratitude for the privilege of being a parent. I have drunk deeply of the goodness of life.

BREAKFAST CHAT

Each day after lunch, I read Gramma and Grampa a chapter from the Bible; after dinner I read them a chapter from a story book. Our current literature is Paul's Letter to the Ephesians and James Herriot's *All Things Bright and Beautiful*. It is at breakfast, at the break of day, when we talk over the day's plans and sometimes delve into the past.

Missing twenty-year-old Josh, I asked Grampa what it was like for him when he was twenty. He told me about his job at NBC in Chicago, where he worked full-time as a guide after school and weekends, wearing his dark blue guide uniform. This was when NBC was almost exclusively radio, and Grampa took pride in rubbing elbows with people who became famous, like Hugh Downs. Mel Torme told Grampa that writing "Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire" was like having an annuity. He'd written it in one afternoon, but every year at Christmastime he'd get a payout when it played on the radio. Some annuity!

Starting when he was eighteen, Grampa worked the five to eleven p.m. shift after high school got out, then took the El train back home. Sundays were the big day for tours because there were two live orchestra shows that day, which played in front of an audience. Then one day, he said, he was on the chopping block. He lost his job at NBC, but was hired at ABC, even though they were only a weekend outfit in those days. Back in 1947 Grampa was making $85 per month at this full-time job, and it was

enough for him to put himself through college while living at home.

The conversation turned to where Merie might go to college. I told Gramma and Grampa that one place on Merie's wish list is where my grandparents, Jim and Peg, met. When they married, Jim brought Peg to a small town in the Adirondack Mountains, where Jim helped run the family business. Alexander Graham Bell installed the first-ever commercial telephone between two branches of the business in 1876, the year Jim's father was born, while the operation was still iron ore mining and smelting. By the time Jim and Peg set up housekeeping, the business had converted to a pulp mill, and then a paper mill. Later, the company was sold, but the buyers didn't keep the retirement contracts. This left my grandfather, in his sixties, earning a living by knocking on doors to try to sell insurance. Fortunately, the U.S. government called Jim and asked him to help set up pulp and paper mills in Korea and India and Panama, so the couple would go and live in these countries for the duration of the contract.

Peg's upbringing as the daughter of a minister in a well-to-do town on Long Island had prepared her for her role as hostess and community nurturer and frugal homemaker. Their later years, when I knew them, they lived out of the enormous vegetable and fruit garden Jim kept in the backyard, and Peg kept up her lifelong knitting, sewing, canning, and baking brownies for the church coffee hour.

Gramma, Grampa, and I could have gone on telling tales, but the social worker called to set up an appointment,

cutting off the conversation. Breakfast comes again tomorrow.

LIKE A BABY

Robert had a meeting in the city tonight, but he urged me to go to my evening meeting anyway. Merie would be home. Should Gramma and Grampa need anything, they could call her. So, with some trepidation, I went.

And I was glad I did. I'd been gardening and was grubby from the day, so I took a shower, put on fresh clothes, and dashed out. Friends I expected to see and friends I hadn't expected but was glad to see were all there. We had a thoughtful discussion and … my cell phone went off.

It was Gramma. "Your dad fell and is on the floor of the bathroom." Click. Was he ok? Did he hit his head? Is he conscious? Is he bleeding? No clue. I raced home through the rainy night, calling 911 on the way, giving out my address, giving instructions on how the emergency workers could get inside to Grampa even though the door was locked, deciding whether an ambulance should be summoned in addition to the first responders.

When I arrived home some ten minutes later - thankfully most of the fifteen stop lights were green – an ambulance and a fire truck were blocking my driveway. I pulled in across the street and ran to the front door.

Unlocking it, I found four burly firemen and ambulance workers in the small bathroom with Grampa wedged uncomfortably on the floor among them. Two

more large-bodied first responders were in the living room, and Gramma was there, too, issuing orders. She may be tiny and frail, but she can speak her mind. She scolded me that the arm of the toilet had swiveled out of place while Grampa was leaning on it, causing him to lose his balance. She wanted it replaced immediately.

The firemen got Grampa into a sitting position, but he couldn't stand. I went to get some orange juice in case he was hypoglycemic. Medical supply kits were opened to test his blood sugar, pulse, etc. Meanwhile one fireman tried engaging me in a discussion of the age and architecture of our home, evidently finding it more interesting than Grampa's good health. An ambulance driver commented she'd been at my house before; someone else noticed we had gotten Grampa a hospital bed since he'd been here last; another person was surprised I wasn't home because I am always there when they come! I didn't realize how well we were known!

That prompted me to ask the question our doctor had asked me: If we call too many times, will they start charging us? No, they laughed. You have no idea how often people call! Everyone was quite cheery now, rolling their eyes, just thinking about their favorite customers. It only costs money if you get into the ambulance.

A neighbor knocked on the door. "Is everything all right? Call me next time! Do you have my phone number? I'll give it to you tomorrow." I could see his wife down the street under her umbrella taking in all the lights in front of my house. I don't know if there had been sirens; I got home after the emergency vehicles arrived.

Forms to sign, advice about a better toilet support frame, next time leave a key outside the house. Introductions: this is Sam, and this is Sam, but everyone calls him Gadget. MacGyver takes lessons from Gadget. Gadget's mom and mother-in-law are also fall-prone. Mark's mother-in-law lives with him. They get what my situation is. They're glad to meet me.

They start to leave, I say I'm sorry I don't have milk and cookies to say thank you to them as I say goodbye. The door closes. They're gone except for the muddy footprints in the front hall. My blood pressure is coming down, but there's still a lot of adrenaline rushing around in me, and a little bit of blue, too. I was out, and Grampa fell.

Grampa has decided with all the excitement he doesn't really need the bathroom after all; he'll stay up and try again later. I get Gramma to bed. She tells me on the way, "I called you and called you!" I feel terrible for the helplessness she went through, but proud of her for using the phone to call me. I didn't know she could do it.

To assuage my conscience, I tell them what I told the first responders: my daughter is here. Gramma and Grampa weren't home alone. But what I didn't say is what we all realize: Merie sleeps like a baby.

BLESSINGS POURED OUT

My home is filled with flowers! They came by special delivery, they came from people's gardens, they came from the grocery store, they came from the florist. Color and beauty and fragrance fill my home. I am so grateful!

On Saturday I had a celebration, to which I'd invited my neighbors, friends from church, friends from the Free Breakfast Program, friends from my past. We gathered in my backyard and visited. We ate the food they'd brought, mingled one group with another, and found connections I hadn't known existed. Those in wheelchairs were served by those who could reach the refreshments. Babies and Jr. high students and high school students and college students, working young adults and young parents and the middle-aged and empty nesters and the frail elderly were there. The destitute and the corporate executives came, and people from many nations. We all enjoyed sunshine and warmth and conviviality in the garden, while a talented homeless man played the piano for us. It was a little piece of heaven. And many folks brought me flowers.

I had invited these folks to help me celebrate forty years of my knowing God's grace. I explained by drawing an analogy: My brother, even though he had a complete family and didn't need any more children, decided with his wife that there were children who needed him. So, at great cost to himself, he left home and traveled to save a little girl's life. He'd waited until she was ready, then, when she

was finally released to him, he brought her straight to the hospital to be healed. Then he took her home to a different nation, established a new structure and set of rules for her, provided her with everything she needed and many opportunities, and loved her deeply as his very own.

Likewise, forty years ago I was ready to be adopted by God. I relinquished one way of life and chose to live for Him, in His way. I was happy to follow the rules He made for His family because it pleased Him when I did, and because I knew the new way of living was healthier for me and my relationships. When I learned He abhors lying, I relinquished that as a primary coping mechanism. And I began to try to imitate some of my Heavenly Father's personality and attitudes, just as a toddler imitates her elders. The sharpest change came in the first month after my adoption: I had been harsh with my younger brother, but now I started to look out for his best interests; I had even – memorably - taken him camping.

The great cost that God paid was that He put on human flesh as one puts on a Hallowe'en costume. Just as He appeared to Abraham and wrestled with Jacob and spoke to Moses, God came again in visible form, the Infinite confined in a baby. This baby named Jesus, a name that means 'God rescues,' lived a life without sin so that He could be an innocent substitute for guilty me – the sacrificial Lamb. He gave His life for my life, took my punishment so I could be considered innocent and be adopted by perfect, holy God.

So, I have much to celebrate. Forty years of being in God's family has been a wonderful time of blessings

poured out. One of the *many* great things about being adopted by God is that I have delightful brothers and sisters who have also been adopted by Him. The best advice I ever got was from one of them: to read the Bible daily. That is helping me to become the person I hope to be, giving me comfort and joy and guidance and perspective. I'm still dysfunctional in some areas, I still give and receive hurts, but through everything, I have a Father who steadfastly loves me deeply as His very own. There is nothing better than that.

After my brother adopted the little girl, he went back and adopted again, providing healing and home to another child. My heavenly Father is also adopting anyone else who is willing to come to him - for blessings poured out.

STAGES OF CAREGIVING (SO FAR)

There have been several distinct phases of caregiving for me, easy to track because my role commenced so suddenly. First, I heard that my in-laws were coming, so there was much wrestling with how to move them 2,000 miles when they could barely leave their condo and Gramma required oxygen. Train, plane, automobile? Then we worked at arranging a living space for them in our home. We evicted ourselves from the most-used room of our home – our den/office/movie-watching space and the downstairs bathroom. We made the space elder-friendly: we removed the living room rug and coffee table, and we installed safety bars in the bathroom. David, a friend from church, changed big steps into little steps. We brought a bed into the room, and we bought a recliner, since that was Grampa's preferred sleeping location. I found wooden boxes the grandparents could step on to get in and out of our van.

Once the grandparents arrived, there was a crash course in medical care. My friend Laura Jo, who is a nurse practitioner, coached me in reading medicine bottles. *Qhs* means "at the hour of sleep", *po* means "by mouth." I learned to run the oxygen machine, get wheelchairs up steps, drive Grampa's motorized wheelchair up into my minivan, keep walkers always within reach. I made up a list of supplies and recruited a friend to seek out sources for purchasing them. In addition to that, there was the shock of showering other naked people, dealing with diapers and smells, and learning what the grandparents could do for

themselves and what I had to do for them. I overextended myself in sympathetic helpfulness, then retreated to everyone caring for themselves as much as possible. I made up a binder to keep in one place all the instruction manuals, medicine lists, doctor contacts, support services and other documents people offered me.

Soon, I was coping well enough to make modifications to improve our situation. The wood laminate floor proved too slippery, so I bought a carpet – just drove over to Home Depot, picked out something cheap but nice-looking, had them stack it in the van and drove it home, using a wheelchair to get it from the van to the house. I recruited a couple young men from church to move all the furniture and lay down the carpet. Then the steps from the bedroom to the bathroom were too challenging, so David came again to build us a ramp. Grampa could pull the blanket to cover his chest, but couldn't cover his feet at night, so I sewed a rod into the long side of a blanket. We all wanted to go for a walk at once, so I figured out how to make a wheelchair train. We tried out lunch at the senior center. We were improvising, we were getting out, we were chatting and playing board games, we were having fun. I enjoyed people noticing how well we were doing; I felt successful at this new endeavor.

Meanwhile, we had the invasion of the body helpers. A physical therapist came three times a week for Grampa, once a week for Gramma. A nurse came twice a week for Grampa's bedsore. A dietician came to teach us how to eat for diabetes. A hospital bed arrived for Grampa. He tried it out and didn't like it; Gramma tried it

and didn't like it; the equipment supply people were summoned to remove it. An occupational therapist came once a week for Grampa's upper body skills. I was offered other services, but I was getting worn out from being a traffic director and appointment scheduler, so I refused those services. Grampa's hearing aid wouldn't work; it took several trips to get it repaired. Then the oxygen machine broke, and we went through four different loaner replacements. We had sleep and waking studies of Gramma to see if we could get a different brand of oxygen machine. Later, after multiple phone calls to four different states and several different agencies, we finally had a functioning oxygen machine and a backup. Gramma and Grampa each had several falls, so we got to know the 911 first responders by first name.

There was a shift. We had four trips to the emergency room for falls or sudden weakness, and one overnight stay. Gramma retreated to her bed and wouldn't go out in the winter weather. We ran out of things to talk about. Grampa started getting worse, needing more care, and I started getting tired. I hired a respite caregiver one day a week. She was wonderful, cleaning our home and feeding the grandparents and generally making my life livable since I was getting to go away from the house for eight hours. I went into the city, I went to the country, I went to the bookstore, anywhere to think about something completely different for one day a week. But our caregiver got sick and wouldn't come back. We went without. We tried an agency with very disappointing results. We went without. Our neighbor discovered I was caring for two disabled people, and I discovered our neighbor was the

Meals on Wheels supervisor. We began getting one meal for each grandparent delivered every day, sometime between 10 a.m. and noon. We found another wonderful respite care person. She came once a week for two weeks; we hired her for five mornings a week. She came for a full week. She hasn't come back. She promises to come tomorrow.

My in-laws are the sweetest people. They vowed to themselves they wouldn't complain, and they have kept their vow. But both caregiving and growing old can take a lot of gumption. Together, we are trying to be brave.

ROAD TRIPPING

April

Two days before her spring break began, Merie announced she wanted to take a road trip to visit her friend Eva during vacation.

Merie and Eva have known each other since they were three years old, holding hands while they ran after the soccer ball, then lying down in the middle of the playing field to look at the clouds and pick daisies while the other children pursued the ball like a swarm of bees. Until Eva moved away four years later, the girls saw each other several times each week, climbing trees, swimming, and consuming that staple of childhood, macaroni and cheese, at one another's homes. A decade has passed, and though they haven't seen each other often, the friendship endures. Plus, a road trip is a great way to spend spring break.

But Merie doesn't have a credit card, so she allowed her mom (me!) to come on the trip. This was delightful for me, not only because of the time Merie and I would have together, but also because Eva's mom is my dear friend Lisa.

Merie drove nearly all of the 1300 miles to Eva's, and the distance was prolonged by being through one desert after another. Wyoming is like a New England February: it's not very pretty, and it feels interminable. The good part about deserts, though, is that the speed limit is loose. Merie

nudged our speed over 100 only a couple of times until eventually I suggested that really, 85 is plenty fast enough. Somehow Merie hadn't communicated to Eva's family that we would be showing up so soon. Nevertheless, they were welcoming, and we had a wonderful time of refreshment with them while Robert managed his parents' care back at home.

Two days of driving, three days of resting and playing, then it was time for two days of driving home again. This time we took the southern route, more geologically interesting, but still desert. We saw many shades of rock and soil, from salt white to volcanic black, ash gray, sand and dun, yellow and burnt sienna and dark brick red. When we got back to the Pacific coastal area, it looked like a different planet, still clothed in its vibrant winter green. I began to appreciate water.

But Merie's road adventures weren't over. She had been stopped by the police a week before we left. They kindly overlooked the fact that she was driving another student two months before it was legal for her to do so. They also didn't make too much of a fuss that one of her headlights was out. But the lack of a sticker proving her 1986 station wagon was registered did disturb them enough to write her a ticket. She either had to go to court, or she had to get herself a sticker and show it at the police station, then hand it in to the courthouse to prove she'd been cleared. When we got home, her court date was six days away.

When the court date was two days away, Merie decided to act. Lo and behold, she found the registration

sticker in her glove compartment! It had been there since a parent (me again) told her to put it on the license plate several months ago. She drove over to the police station to demonstrate that she was legally registered, and they signed off.

On her way from the police station to the courthouse…she scraped a young man's car. So now she got to practice not only the bureaucratic entanglements of law violations, but also the practical negotiations and obsequious repentance for causing an accident. Don't you just love the teen years?

Thankfully the other driver's anger succumbed to Merie's apologies. They looked up how to handle an accident, wrote down all the insurance information, then he offered to skip the insurance company and just take $100 for paint repair. And, by the way, was she married?

Merie and I talked through the accident and driving in general, and she confessed she doesn't like "unprotected" left turns. There are other unprotected activities I worry about, so I calmly explained that when I have a left turn, I just wait to see what the oncoming car's intentions are. Merie exclaimed, "But that takes so much…paying attention!"

We will get through this.

MORNING CALL

My morning began with a thump.

It was the third thump of the night, the first one being Grampa clumping his way to the kitchen for some bread and peanut butter around 2:30 a.m.

The second was Merie getting up at 3:40 a.m. to continue studying for an AP Statistics exam. The students who were in the school play are now battling their way uphill toward a B- grade. They studied together yesterday, but they found themselves stumped by the difference between a chi-squared test for homogeneity and the chi-squared test for independence. I took statistics twice in graduate schools, and don't remember caring that much about chi-squared's homogeneity nor its independence, but if the kids had asked me, I could have explained that independence is a goal of youth, while homogeneity, that acceptance of and comfort with oneself, is a gift that comes from fifty-plus years of living.

The third thump was Grampa again. He was coming or going to the washroom - and fell. Robert usually takes the midnight fall duty, but he's on a business trip for a week. When I found Grampa, he was piously on his knees at his wife's bed, leaning across her legs. She, of course, was awakened, demanded crossly, "What happened?" and began her struggle to get out of bed to the washroom. We extricated her legs from under Grampa's chest, but that took some doing, and I kept exclaiming to her, "Don't fall out of bed! Don't fall out of bed!" My bathrobe was in the

wash, you see, and if Gramma fell, I'd have to call the firemen to help. I didn't want the firemen to see me in my nightgown, even though the firemen are practically family members since they come often to pick up grandparents when I can't. For a moment there, our living situation looked ludicrous to impossible. I wondered how long we can sustain this.

But we managed to get Gramma's legs out from under Grampa while she lay precariously near the edge of the bed. With some hauling and pulling, we were able to get her upper body upright, but now her feet were on Grampa's calves, holding him down. It took inserting Gramma's walker into the tangle of legs to give her a brace to pull on, and more hauling by me, but finally Gramma was wobbling on her feet. Grampa patiently waited out the tugging and cajoling and rearranging, and once Gramma was making her steady shuffle toward the bathroom, he asked me to put a pillow under his knees. This wasn't an easy feat, but I knew it was a merciful one since *my* knees wouldn't have lasted that long, and they're thirty-odd years younger than his!

Pressing his head and hands into the bed and his feet into the floor, Grampa was eventually able to raise his backside until his legs could take his weight. I scooched his walker under the arch made by his body, thinking he'd stand all the way up and go back to bed. But he asked me to remove it and sat down on Gramma's bed to recover.

I took a couple steps away to check Gramma's progress. When I turned back, I saw Grampa check his watch and spontaneously fall asleep sitting up. Since that

new method of sleeping has resulted in some of his recent falls and some ugly scrapes on his hands from rug burns, I woke him and herded him back to bed.

"Kay!" Gramma called urgently. What could it be now? Turns out she'd lost a sock in the confusion and was just seeing her own toes for the first time in ages. I keep her feet in socks for warmth, and I've had to keep weaning her from wearing shoes to bed. Her toes are crumpled with arthritis, and her big toe had gotten stuck under the second toe. "My toes are crossed!" she fretted. I uncrossed her toes, waited out her washroom visit, checked on everyone, said good-bye to my daughter heading off to school and wished her well on her exam, and thought of going back to bed. But now the sun is up, the garbage trucks are making their noisy rounds, and the possibility of coffee pulls me toward the kitchen. I'll start a load of laundry and wash my robe. That way I'll be ready for tonight.

THE PERILS OF GARDENING

Gardening may not *seem* very hazardous, but I have two new fingerprints to disprove that assumption.

I've had to donate prints of my fingers on a couple occasions. The California Department of Justice and the FBI collect them for all people licensed in California for helping professions. Also, our church requires anyone volunteering with children to give their fingerprints, again to the same agencies. I'd always argued about this: I'm already on file! But now I know: fingerprints can change.

Family members and friends who have kept track of me know that I love my garden and that there is a gopher who loves it as well. He and I have had several run-ins: the nearly ripe cantaloupe eaten from underneath so that when I tried to harvest it, it was already hollow; the gnawed potatoes; the ground collapsing beneath my feet as I trod on one of his tunnels. With the added responsibility of elder care, I was loathe to begin gardening this season if all my work would be going into the belly of a rodent.

The proof of his presence was in the disappearance of one of my sunflowers. We'd harvested the seeds from the previous summer to scatter for the birds. What the birds didn't eat took root and grew, making a lovely forest, but one day one of the plants had fallen to the ground. The next day, all but the tip of it had disappeared into the new tunnel at the base of the plant. There are few things more discouraging than a hungry gopher. Robert liberally

sprinkled repellant around the rim of my garden, but I still had my doubts. As Gramma and Grampa and I sat on the patio, I surveyed the garden and wondered. Last year I'd had broccoli and peas, flowers and tomatoes, and the joy of watching it all grow and of getting to harvest. But this year I had much less capacity to be feeding a gopher as well as my family.

Then my neighbor showed me his raised boxes, and I thought, "I could do that!" If the boxes had screening on the bottom that allowed drainage but kept out critters, then I could grow my vegetables without having to share them with the burrowing masses. I don't actually know how many gophers there are, but my mother hypothesizes that where there's one, there's a litter.

At my age, my parents were capable do-it-yourselfers, which led me to believe I should be able to tackle the building of a box. I wandered Home Depot, accosting various employees and asking them about types of wood, the ideal size for my box, and how to fasten the boards together. In spite of my enthusiasm, from experience I knew I should only attempt *one* box; my projects have a way of not completing themselves if they are too grandiose. I came home with sawn boards and screening, found the power screwdriver and screws, extension cord and staple gun, and set to work. How hard could this be?

I screwed short posts onto each end of two boards, making the two opposing sides of my box. My idea was that the posts would be hammered into the ground to provide stability. Until, that is, I stapled the screen onto the

wrong side of the boards. Now the design called for the posts to be up in the air. Maybe my box could become a pen for my (imagined) chickens? Rabbits? I began dreaming of raising sheep. Ok. Keep going. Focus. Back to building a garden box. But a couple of weeks intervened, with rain and travel and a relocation of my box that resulted in the screen mostly falling off. Persevere!

The next step was to attach the end boards to the side boards. I got out all my equipment again, snaked the extension cord through the garden to the house electrical outlet, and tried to follow my son's instructions about drilling a small hole first before inserting the screw. For some reason – maybe my screw bit was too large or too dull – this didn't work except to dig a narrow saucer in the wood. I stuck a screw into the saucer, applied the electric screwdriver, and pulled the trigger. It looked like everything was working, except the screw wasn't moving into the wood. I pushed hard on the screwdriver, but still no movement. I set down the screwdriver and grabbed the screw to see if it was embedded into the wood at all. Yes, it was, and not only that, but the friction of trying to get embedded had made it extremely hot!

Licking my thumb and forefinger, I quickly put away my tools and rushed to the freezer, where I pinched ice cubes for an hour. For the subsequent twelve hours I rotated bags of frozen vegetables until they got soggy and warm and I replaced them with the next bag. Fortunately, we had been shopping recently! I learned to function with my left hand; beside that, I tried reading a suspense novel

so I'd have something other than pain to think about. I love Tylenol.

Now I have a very distinctive marking: a clear imprint of a screw on two digits. I'm not sure that the garden box is going to get finished very soon. The gopher may yet win.

DISCONNECT

Grampa, such a dear man, has begun falling twice a day. He slumps; his chin is barely an inch above the table when he eats; his dominant hand is nearly useless. This results in messes in the bathroom and at mealtime. He has a scrape on his forehead and on his knee and on the back of his hand – each scrape acquired at a different fall. Twice this weekend Robert picked him up, once Merie and I were able to help him maneuver himself up onto his bed, once I called the fire department for a lift assist. I'm so thankful the fire department never charges for this service. I wish Grampa didn't need it.

Grampa's handwriting has deteriorated to near illegibility, but still, he wants to write his own checks. That means he's liberally decorated with whiteout, and all the checks that can't be read he tears up and starts again.

Grampa ran out of checks; he only had $50 in cash to pay his caregiver the $200 he owed her. She went home with a quarter of the income due her, and she won't be coming again until his checks arrive from the bank. I won't be getting time away this week.

Grampa's care is waking us up in the night and keeping us busy by day. We are concerned about his declining neurological state, so we called Pam and encouraged her to fly out for a visit. Grampa was an old man when he came to us; he's a very old man now. We think it's time for her to visit her dad while they can still enjoy each other.

For the past nine months that Gramma and Grampa have been living with us, Pam has been recovering from caring for them. She has also been researching and planning how to sell their condo for them. Every day she and Grampa have been on the phone discussing what needs to be done, how to do it, what contractors to hire, what real estate agent to hire, what they say, how to pay for all the plans. When the condo refurbishment starts in a couple of months, Pam and her husband will need to vacate for the work to be done. The contractors will be installing a new carpet, toilets, sinks, kitchen appliances, deck, and paint – the whole shebang. Without a roof for their heads and without work to tie them down, Pam and her husband and dog are talking of driving two thousand miles to our home. Summer road trip!

I wouldn't recommend this. But the real disconnect begins with her purpose in her visit. She's hoping to bring her parents back home with her when she returns, and I don't see how she'll manage it. Merie and I just drove over two thousand miles on vacation, so the idea of Pam, the only driver, driving twice that far with three disabled bodies – four, if you count Pam's need for a knee operation – seems dubious.

But first she is deciding to buy a house with a mortgage. At this moment, she's on the phone telling Gramma all about the pretty house and how they'll just have fun being together and laughing with one another and not worrying about anything.

There are so many concerns I have about Pam's plans, but I am the in-law. By personality, I am practical

and serious and careful, the opposite of Pam. We love one another dearly and value one another's strengths, but we can't live one another's lives. I have to let go.

So much of my life just now is about letting go, disconnecting from what I care about and what I've been. My daughters are dating men I don't know. Our youngest is deciding on a college, leaning toward the one 3000 miles away. I'm letting go of my work of twenty-seven years of being a mom, and I don't know what comes next. For nine months my framework has included planning what's best for the grandparents; apparently in a couple of months I'll be letting go of that, too. Meanwhile, I'm intensely involved in this life task and still trying to do my best at it, still working each day before I arise to *motivate* myself to do well at it. A faint cloud of depression is hovering. Yesterday's sermon was an encouragement to persevere. I needed that.

THE RIGHT THING

From my bedroom window each morning I look out on the treetop in my backyard. It is spring, so the branches are leafless, with tiny buds, and the birds in them are visible. Today there was a wee wren, so shy that it disappeared as soon as I peeked at it. There was an industrious black and white tufted junco pursuing its nesting agenda by collecting bits of stuff, crisscrossing over the tree in its purposeful way. A hyperactive hummingbird tried out seven different twigs to perch upon, then zoomed off to a different tree. And the usually jubilantly songful finch, with a chin and chest the color of a glorious sunset, serenely basked in the rising morning light, quietly taking in the new day.

As I am enjoying the different species of birds, it strikes me yet again how much God likes variety. This aspect of His character speaks to me against all the ways we pressure one another to conform, whether through school uniforms or the "right" hairstyle or career or college or car.

I have been hugely subject to the concept of doing the right thing, and I have spent many moments wondering if I'm doing it; it has been a great entrapment for me. When I was a teenager, I shifted the necessity of obeying my parents to the necessity of obedience to God. God is love, but I knew Him first as Lawgiver. That was helpful in teaching me how to live healthfully and avoid many pitfalls, but I focused too much on the rules. Now I've

come to understand the purpose of His law is so we can know what is and isn't loving – to Him, to one another, to ourselves. I needn't be afraid of His law, nor fixated on it. It is the framework that gives me freedom, the railing that keeps me from falling over the edge. The railing, however, *isn't the point*. It's just there to provide safety so that I can enjoy freedom. Like a stop light, it enables flow and prevents catastrophe. It shows me how to walk in step with our Father in Heaven. With my obedience to His safety measures for me, His child, I show Him my love and acknowledge His love for me.

The greatest lesson of my adult life - which I'm clearly still trying to internalize - has been that *the right thing* is the *loving* thing. The point is not law; it is love. Law is the chute that directs love, the signpost showing the way. How different classrooms are where the teachers have these two views, the supremacy of law vs. of love. In the first, where laws are an end in themselves, and the other where law is the means to love! In one, the children line up in grim silence, work is onerous, the teacher's goal is control, and she is ever frustrated by humanity breaking out. In the other, children are managed for their benefit, and order is imposed only for the help it gives, not to control. Freedom is granted whenever and however possible. Joy and kindness and the pleasure of work are the flavors of the day. I have been both kinds of teacher, both kinds of mother. I find I have imposed law mostly as a defense, when tired or afraid.

As a young mom, I was too aware of the rules around me, and I urged that necessity to Be Good on my

oldest in my effort to be a Good Mother. (Amanda was an only child for six years). Don't flush twice – you're wasting water! Look, he's smoking – that's bad! Those clothes don't match! There were so many rules. I worried frequently about what society said was the right thing, how it was evaluating her – and me.

I was talking this week with Amanda. She questioned whether it was the right thing for me to be caring as I am, very uncomfortably sometimes, for my in-laws. Would I want her to be going through what I'm going through? If she were in my place, wouldn't I swoop in and fix it so she didn't have to do this?

Yes. I hope she never has to dirty herself with another adult's excrement, or lose sleep three nights running because they fall, or be isolated from her life and friends because of being a caregiver. I love her so much, I want everything good and beautiful for her.

But would I do what I'm doing now *for her*? Absolutely. It would be a privilege and joy to minister to her, even in this most fundamental and smelly and hands-on way, if she needed me. I love her so much, I would do anything for her.

I realized after we talked that what I hope for her, even more than freedom from a caregiving role such as mine, is that she experience love as deep as mine. I hope that there is, or will be, someone in her life whom she loves so much, she will be willing to do anything at all for them. Then she will know how much I love her. And she will begin to know how much God loves her. God is love, and

love gives. It gives relentlessly, unfailingly, to the point of deepest suffering and loss, yet in joy because of the love for the beloved. My task is unbearable if I focus on my suffering. But if I focus on the love I have for my daughter or my God - for whom these two frail old people are merely surrogates - then this job is an honor for which I am grateful.

To avoid suffering is an instinctive thing. Love is the right thing, the best thing. Instead of worrying about doing the right thing in others' eyes - and there are too many people to please - I *want* to act propelled by love. God, help me.

CONTENTMENT

Spring is vigorously announcing itself here, and the temperatures are rising enough so that Robert took a break from his project to invite me out for frozen yogurt. We chatted while we enjoyed the treat, and when we got back, I told Gramma and Grampa what a lovely day it was outside. Would they like to go for a walk? Gramma said she was staying indoors until the temperature got to the nineties, but Grampa was game. We perched his straw hat on his head, put on his glasses, and headed out the back door that leads from their bedroom into the garden.

There's a two-inch step there to get outside, and Grampa fell. It was a slow fall, and he landed mostly on his bottom. It was the third fall in twenty-four hours, so the adrenaline and excitement no longer peak at these events. I summoned Robert who did a couple of deep knee bends to warm up, then hoisted Grampa back onto his feet. Away we went on our walk.

When we go for a walk, Grampa hunches over his walker and clomps along. Through the side yard, through the gate, down the driveway, stepping off the curb, he walks in the middle of the street because there are the fewest cracks there to climb over. I push the wheelchair, keeping it as close to Grampa's back as possible, because when he gets tired, he sits down without warning. Once he's sitting, he starts chatting, so I come alongside and bend over to hear what he has to say. Today he wanted to discuss how everyone tries to get him to stand up straight

when he's walking, but how he likes to lean far forward because it feels more stable to him. I modeled for him how bent over he usually is, and we discussed the merits of having your head, shoulders and trunk supported by your legs versus by your arms. From a distance, I probably looked like I was doing some strange calisthenics or dancing in the middle of the street.

It was early evening, when people were coming home from their day, so we had plenty of neighbors to wave at. They all patiently waited while Grampa trudged to the end of the block and back, not hearing their cars and therefore oblivious, even to the ice cream man. At another rest stop, Grampa began chronicling his scrapes, noting which ones had been bad, which were healing, which were recent. To lighten things a bit, I told him that Merie, who enjoys being daring and adventurous, considers that any day that she ends up with scrapes or bruises is a good day. Grampa suggested, "Maybe she should set her sights higher." Then he added, "From my experience, scrapes are easy to come by!" We trudged a little more. I called out thank you to the back-door neighbors for fixing our fence; they thanked us for the flowers I'd put by their door. One last rest, then Grampa announced it was time for "the final assault:" over the curb, up the driveway, through the gate and into the backyard.

Home again, I settled Grampa on the patio to rest in the sun while I watered the garden. I wheeled Gramma out for some sun and company, and they held hands while I told them about the birds I'd seen today. Gramma pointed out there was a breeze blowing, so I fetched a blanket to

cover her. She asked the name of the calla lilies, and I found two kumquats growing on our little tree, peeled them both, and gave one to each grandparent. Gramma spit her seeds out into my hand, then held her hand so Grampa could spit his seeds into it, which she then handed to me. It was so warm and lovely, I asked if they would like to have their dinner outdoors. Grampa was confused about his location and said he thought it would disturb the neighbors if we ate in the driveway. Gramma was happy to go inside.

While I prepared and served their meal at the kitchen table, Robert worked nearby, and Merie played her music and prepared a new recipe for the rest of us. She cooked the pasta and set it aside while working on the Alfredo sauce. She commented, "Pasta is like a little child. If you don't pay attention to it, it does things you don't want it to do!" I pulled some garlic from the garden so she could decide between it and the powdered garlic in a jar, and we estimated how much salt she had just added. I tucked the grandparents into bed, covered the patio table with a cloth, then my husband and daughter and I sat together and ate her tasty meal in the setting sun while the hummingbirds and finches flew around and sang to us.

SUSPENSE

When Amanda, our firstborn, was too young to sit up by herself, I took her grocery shopping and propped her sideways in the little compartment at the top of the shopping cart. Curious about something behind her, she flipped herself out of the cart and, with a loud smack, landed on her head. A shocking silence was replaced by a violent scream, but then that subsided as I held and soothed her – so much so that I wondered for a moment if I should just purchase my groceries and go home. But no, we'd go to the Emergency Room and have her checked.

We sat in the little waiting room after her X-rays were taken. "You're fine, you can go now," the nurse said to the man ahead of us. Then I heard her out in the hall say, "Have you told the mother yet?" The doctor answered, "No, I'm about to."

Amanda's skull was fractured, a terrifying diagnosis. She was admitted to the hospital for observation overnight. I stayed the night with her – Robert was on a business trip – and my friend Laura and my mother kept me company for part of the night. The nurses came in every hour or two to wake her up, to be sure she could still be awakened. The next day there was nothing to do but go home. "Now we wait," the doctor said. "We won't know for four months whether she'll recover entirely." It was a long, hard wait. Thankfully, she recovered fully.

Now it is twenty-six years later, and Amanda recently took her examination to see whether she would

qualify to practice her profession. She had studied excruciatingly hard – study notes were in her shower, at her meals, nothing else could she consider for the months leading up to the examination, and so much hinged on the results. But once she took the exam, she wouldn't know for months whether she'd passed. How well I could relate to her suspense!

Finally, yesterday the results were released, and yes, she passed! We had tears of relief – well, I did, anyway. Then, how to celebrate? I browsed for champagne on wine.com. I resolved to send flowers – no, a plant that would last to commemorate the achievement. Unable to make up my mind, I walked to our grocery store to pick up some eggs I needed. I grinned all the way there and accosted some dog-walkers to announce that my child had passed her big exam. At the store, I started my celebratory wonderings again: This champagne? Fancy chocolates? Maybe I should buy *myself* some Pop-tarts? Unable to make up my mind, (it had been a tiring week), I decided to wait until morning. And then it came to me: I would write her a rap song!

So, I emailed Amanda my rap song, and when a final verse came to me, I called her cell phone and chanted (you can't really say 'sang') it as a message to her. Later I chanted it to Merie, who turned red with embarrassment, commended me politely, and commanded me *never* to do that in front of her friends.

ALFRED'S DAY

Working under the theory that you can do anything as long as there's an end to it, I volunteered to have Alfred stay with us for the weekend. Alfred is my friend's foster child, and my friend has been so kind to me in so many ways that, when she had an opportunity to get away for a weekend, I proposed to pitch in to make her getaway possible.

Alfred is fourteen, can count to three, loves people and animals and superheroes and talking. He has a tremendous memory for actors who played his favorite superhero and what year the movie was made. He doesn't seem to remember rules he'd rather not follow, such as "Don't help Grampa."

Being the most gregarious person I know, when Alfred awoke at 5:15 a.m. he immediately started looking for someone to be with. He opened all the bedroom doors and peered in at us in our beds. Exhorted to go back to his room until it was light outside, he found Josh's guitar and began strumming. Soon he was strumming and singing. I relinquished my bed.

For about an hour I maintained there'd be a chance I could shower before dressing. I tried feeding him breakfast, I tried having him play the guitar out in the minivan, I tried a superhero movie, but eventually I gave up on the idea of a shower, sent him to get dressed while I dressed myself, and rushed us out of the house so *someone* could get some sleep.

We drove to the big farmer's market in the adjacent town – it was too early. We drove to the little farmer's market in my town – it was too early. We went to the grocery store to use their bathroom, then bought carrots for the horses. Alfred hadn't stopped talking – he didn't all day. His conversation runs, "Carrots? For the horses? I hold them? See horses? Feed them carrots?" And so on. I gave little responses to each of his questions, or he'd repeat them. His speech isn't that clear, so I had to concentrate on what he was saying, unlike moms who can "uh hunh" their way through a toddler's prattling.

We climbed under the gate that leads to the hillside where the five horses live along with twenty-odd wild turkeys. We had to hike up a ways to see them, but Alfred was very tickled by the turkeys, and he could make a high-pitched gobble that would make them all gobble back at him. Very satisfying. Then the horses screwed up their courage to let us approach, and we handed off the carrots as a reward. Alfred hugged them and tried to get them to walk under his direction, but they were big and strong enough that he could do no harm and they did what they wanted.

By now it was about 8:30 a.m. of our second day with Alfred. Robert had taken him for most of the previous day – to the train, to the museum, to the park, to the bakery – so today was my day. We went to church where Alfred gladly said hi to many strangers, stayed through the singing, then announced he was ready to go. He was hungry by then and, seeing the communion plate full of crackers, he made a dive for it, but I was able to redirect him to the donut table. Phew.

We stopped by the house and saw Grampa, whose hearing aid was dangling. "Grampa's ear falling off! I help put it on!" We didn't stay long.

Next, I offered him the beach or the zoo. He wanted a bookstore. Alfred is quiet in the car, so we went to a bookstore an hour away. He had two specific books in mind, of the latest *Wizard of Oz* movie – real actors, not cartoons – and a book of his superhero movie with, again, photos of the actors. Alfred checked nearly every shelf, and a very obliging clerk helped us look, but to no avail. By then hunger was devouring my sanity, so we went next door to an IKEA store for their cheap lunch. They have lots to look at, so I thought it would be a good time killer, but we zipped through there as fast as humanly possible, got Alfred his macaroni and cheese, and then we could linger to play with puppets, chat with the sales clerk to ask him if he spoke French (Alfred's superhero movie comes in French), play with the sales clerk's name badge while chatting with him, exclaim over the lady who had only one leg, ask other people if they'd seen her, why she had one leg, etc., and buy a candle for his foster mom.

It was 12:30, and I was exhausted. I texted Merie to please meet us at the pet shop in our town, and told Alfred, who was familiar with the store, to show her the animals. So many fish tanks, so many birds and guinea pigs and lizards – that should keep them busy for a while so I could sit on the patio and rest. The pet shop lasted about five minutes. Merie kindly took Alfred for a smoothie, back to the pet store, wandering around, while I put my head on my arms and tried to recover some energy. Alfred's foster

mom called about then, “I’m on my way. Be there in half an hour.” Alfred and Merie joined me at the patio table, and I held my breath until she came.

Alfred’s day made me remember what it was like to be a mother of a toddler – sort of. You can’t pick Alfred up and pop him in the car if that’s where you want him to be. He’s quite cooperative as long as you’re with him, by which I mean within inches of him. But the best part was the chance to see inside other people’s lives, to stretch in compassion. Thank you, Alfred, for giving me a glimpse of your life, and a better understanding of my own.

TRANSITION

May

Transition is what they call the last phase of labor before the baby is born.

With my first pregnancy I read and believed the literature that said anesthesia for the mother was bad for the baby, so I had my delivery naturally. Not counting the burst of energy on Monday that got me mowing the lawn, nor the warning shot my body gave at ten a.m. on Tuesday, nor the break of my water at 7 p.m. Tuesday night in the middle of childbirth class while Robert was away on a business trip, unreachable, somewhere in another state, my labor lasted seventeen and a half hours.

I left my childbirth class and went to my parents' house, which was close to the hospital. Robert called for a nightly hello, found out the news, took the last plane back, and arrived for the onset of consistent labor. Which mostly meant walking through the halls for hours. Things got more intense, so my nurse suggested I take a relaxing shower. I was there for three hours. Finally, the baby meant business, I was propped up on the table, wires were attached, and the hard work began. I wasn't afraid. I knew women had been doing this for thousands of years, mostly successfully, my great-grandmother's attendance by a drunken doctor who didn't clean his instruments being a logical exception. And it was worth it! I so wanted this

baby, whom I knew instinctively was a girl. Sooner or later, she'd arrive. I just had to hang in there.

Then the pain became unbearable. My resolve to do without anesthesia collapsed, and I begged the nurse for some. "It's too late," she told me. Too late? Nobody told me there'd come a point when I would be desperate for help and even if I asked for it, it would be too late! "I don't want to do this anymore!" I wailed. I wanted to get off the table and go home and be done. I was in transition.

I am again in transition. In birthing labor, breathing is what gets you through the pain. Likewise, I admonish myself now to just take another breath. Keep breathing. It's how we endure. There is no baby at the end about to be born, no reward to look forward to, unless it's my character that will have been refined. I am admitting to myself that I don't want to do this elder care anymore. I had two different dreams last night where I was cleaning up excrement. Gramma's voice when she calls me to her aid grates on my nerves. This morning when I heard Grampa calling, instead of rushing as usual to the rescue, I got into the shower and let my daughter manage. I'm not proud of myself. I feel guilty, I know it's bad, I know I'm not treating them the way I want to be treated. I'm avoiding them, my smile is forced, it's no fault of theirs that I'm done with toenail fungus and pulling up pants and drool and mess.

Ironically, I have help five mornings a week, during which, for financial reasons, I've taken on a part-time job. Maybe it's this distancing that has cut the emotional

ties, maybe it's that – well, I don't know what it is, but I want to get off the table and be done.

I used to like being needed, but I don't want to be anyone's sunshine for a while. It is useful for me to feel this because lately Merie has been my sunshine, and it is time for her to begin her transition to college life. She's beginning to clean out her room, to say goodbye to friends, to have sad dreams of having to leave beloved books behind, and I mustn't look to her for emotional support.

Transition is the most fruitful period of labor; it is what produces the baby. Although my reserves of kindness and empathy are used up, and my bent toward escapism is calling me, there's a verse from the Bible that I grab and clutch: "I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me." I am about to find out what this really means. In all forms of suffering, the ideas of religion are transformed during the period of transition from being pleasant sentiments to being the pitons by which climbers cling to vertical faces and are saved - if, of course, there is Truth in the ideas. The One I worship knelt in a garden and admitted, "I don't want to do this. Nevertheless, not My will, but Thine be done." Then He died for droolers and messers and those with demanding voices so that they could be made perfect and spend forever with Him. Three days later He broke death's chains and lives on. *That's* the strength I'm going to have to rely on, power far beyond my own.

THE DREADED THOUGHT

It's happened. The subject has been broached. *Nursing home* slipped out of my mouth.

Grampa's dexterity and strength have been declining these last few months so that he can hardly feed himself, and when he does it isn't pretty. I mentioned gently that someday he might need me to feed him, and when that happened, he could just tell me, it would be okay. He has needed more help managing in the bathroom, too. But the thing that will make it necessary to leave our house will be if he can't walk to and from the toilet. Our bathroom is just too small to get a wheelchair in and out.

Tonight, he walked into the bathroom, but on his way out his legs could barely support him enough to get to the wheelchair waiting just outside the door. In the past when this has happened, he has rallied after a night's sleep, so maybe he will again. But as he rested to gain strength enough to shift from the wheelchair to the bed, I said it. "We may have to look into you staying in a nursing home because our bathroom is just too small."

I was glad, so glad, that I could blame the problem on our bathroom size, instead of on anything he might feel hurt by. I know Gramma and Grampa don't want to live in a nursing home. They want a loved one to fuss over them, talk to them, help them, prepare food for them, etc. I get that. It would feel lonely.

They don't talk much to one another – I guess after almost sixty years together you know everything your spouse is thinking, and talking becomes unnecessary. Also, they can no longer hear each other, so the dinner table conversations consist of one person making a statement, the other one asking me what the first person said, I elucidate loudly, and then the pattern repeats. In a nursing home, they'd be shut into their own thoughts even more than they are here.

It is taking three adults to care for these two elders. We have our caregiver five mornings each week, which makes a huge difference to me. Still, there are the other nineteen hours of the day when she's not here, and Robert and I tag-team the job, with some helps from Merie.

The nice thing is that Gramma and Grampa are still grateful for our help. Once I'd settled Grampa into his bed, removed his shoes and pulled up the covers, he slept about ten minutes while I helped Gramma and cleaned the bathroom. As I was tucking Gramma into bed, she said, "Thank you for helping us." Grampa woke up and chimed in, "I nominate you for statehood." That's appreciation on a large scale!

EASY PEASY

Things have been easy lately, and I'm grateful. The effects of Grampa's recent mini stroke that left him without dexterity and barely able to walk have receded. He's able to feed himself and walk and use his hands better than in a long time. I am grateful to those who prayed!

Grampa and Gramma have a caregiver who comes five mornings a week. She does the laundry and changes sheets and keeps the environment clean. She gives them their showers, shaves Grampa's chin, and gives them haircuts. She is gentle and hard-working and feeds them two meals a day; Meals-on-Wheels provides their third meal. After she leaves, they nap for the afternoon until dinner time.

Robert has taken over much of the care for his folks. He often comes home early enough to supervise their dinner, reading to them stories from *The Greatest Generation*. He has taken over the management of Grampa's hearing aid, which has required several trips to the supplier lately for an upgrade. Robert has worked out a schedule of waking Grampa up at midnight for a bathroom run, which has reduced the number of messes and resulting distresses.

The grandparents have graduated from the extra caregivers – the nurse who used to come three times a week to address Grampa's bedsore because a hospital bed allowed it to heal. The physical therapists who came once a week for Gramma and twice a week for Grampa were

helpful, but her allotment was up and the responsibility for keeping up the exercise lies with the grandparents now that they know what to do and how to do it. The nutritionist who came to teach us how to feed a diabetic is no longer needed because Grampa has lost 45 extra pounds and Gramma 25, so everybody weighs just what they should, (well, except for me), and diabetes is no longer an issue. We also entertained an occupational therapist, a social worker, several visits from firemen and ambulance drivers, oxygen therapists, medical equipment installers and removers, etc., but all that commotion and traffic has died down. It's actually peaceful at our home now.

The medical equipment is all functioning well. This iteration of a hospital bed stays inflated; this iteration of the oxygen machine is working, and we have a backup oxygen machine if it fails. We are smooth sailing!

I have laid down some of the responsibility I was carrying for their happiness. I used to try to take them on outings and play games with them after meals. I don't do that anymore. Winter, though mild here, made trying to get them out of the house an ordeal because Gramma was afraid of being cold. Game-playing became an ordeal because Grampa couldn't hear or hold game pieces. And I just got tired of lugging around two people's happiness buckets, trying to keep them filled. They have each other, they have the telephone, they have their TV, they have a DVD player, they can step outside into the garden, they can take the initiative if they want something. At first, I thought that their age and tiny bit of dementia meant they couldn't take initiative, but if there are cookies in the

kitchen, the grandparents have the drive in the middle of the night to seek them out and satisfy the sweet tooth. I conclude they know how to get their own happiness.

I do still kiss them good-morning and read to them at dinnertime if it's my turn to be with them. I tell them about my day and what I know of my children's lives. But my 24/7 care for them has turned into about an hour a day of face-to-face care. For five hours a day I'm completely free to do my part-time job upstairs, and the rest of the time I'm just around, just in case Grampa wants a trip to the bank or post office.

I had started feeling isolated, like I'd lost friends since I wasn't showing up at the usual places and events. But suddenly, just as I began to feel that way, people started calling me to stop by, let's have coffee, let's go for a walk, was I free for lunch? Can we do it again next week?

My wishes come true almost before I voice them. Prom dress shopping with Merie wasn't an endless ordeal: she liked the first dress she tried on, and it was a clearance item! She gave me a hammock for Mother's Day, and I wished for a counter-height side table to accompany it, to hold my book and iced tea. *Ten minutes later*, driving down our street, I saw someone had left at their curb a counter-height side table they were getting rid of.

I'm hearing my Father tell me He's with me, He understands, He's helping me, He's blessing me. Though I feel worn out, life almost seems *too* easy! I'm tempted to take on more responsibilities, but I'm learning to enjoy the

gentle times and use them to rest up for the next episode. I'm very grateful for this easy-peasy lull.

MY BOY CAME HOME!

I've had such fun being a mom this week, watching and helping in our kids' adventures. Amanda has been texting me about her vacation travels abroad. Merie is preparing for a big school presentation and a prom, and Josh was home for a week between college and his summer job.

Josh's first act after sophomore year final exams was to take seven friends camping for the weekend – most of whom had never been before. The friends were in the capable hands of my Eagle Scout, who arrived by public transportation, gave me a hug, spent five minutes in our garage extracting camping gear, grabbed my keys and with another hug rushed back to campus to pick up his friends and take them to the forest. After the first night in tents, they hiked all day and the following day they spent at the beach. What a perfect way to wind down from the semester!

Josh and Merie had lots to talk about when he returned. First, they had to discuss which trees were the best to climb. Josh showed us pictures of him up a tree while camping, and Merie proudly showed off her bruises and scrapes. On Monday the two of them went out to lunch and Josh explained economics and higher-level math to Merie. Of course, music and movies were compared and enthused over during the week, and they even went to see the latest movie together. Josh's current hobby is swing dancing, so he took Merie into the city (on a school night!)

to a club where she could learn and dance with him and his friends. They got home about one a.m., and she got up at her usual five a.m. to do homework. Josh designated the next day as "Dad Day," having a long lunch with Robert, and Merie got to catch up on sleep.

Once he returned from his campout, Josh had a chance to realize that changing apartments for the coming school year resulted in two overlapping leases. Since he was heading to Kansas for his summer job, that meant he had just five days in which to find two people to sublet his two California apartments for the summer.

First, he extracted portions of his belongings from the old apartment. This is where California shows its shortcomings because in New England, where I'm from, we have basements for situations like this. Here, however, the couch, dresser, luggage, schoolbooks, etc., etc. had to find nooks to occupy in our garage and Josh's bedroom, which was no easy task. After partially moving out (the mattress and desk and kitchen gear stayed at the apartment for the sub-letter), Josh turned his attention to advertising his two apartments. The one he's moving out of consisted of a tiny bedroom with a top bunk and three other men in the apartment. The one he's moving into had five men in it this past year, where Josh will have his own bedroom and the living room is big enough for him to host meetings of his various clubs. The only problem with the new apartment is that the past year's residents did not own a broom or vacuum, nor, apparently, any other cleaning utensils. Nor did they believe in dealing with mail that wasn't addressed to them, so *all* the junk mail that had

arrived in the past *year* was in heaps around the living room. Josh and I spent one morning just cleaning the place up enough to take pictures for his Craigslist advertisement for new roommates.

Two days later we spent an entire morning cleaning the apartment enough to show to prospective renters. What I really admire about my son is that, instead of ranting about others' irresponsibility, he quietly went about scrubbing the mold and mildew from the tub and commented, "I see this apartment will take some strong leadership," and began to strategize how to motivate his new roommates to be invested in keeping order. He is understated and thoughtful, and will, I suspect, have a powerful influence on those he lives with. He treated me to curry at his favorite Indian restaurant after our labors were completed, and he told me I was "amazing." You see why I'd do anything for that boy!

In just one week, he'd gone camping, visited with family, moved out of his apartment, and signed subletting contracts for two apartments. Now it was time to head off to his summer job.

He left us on Saturday morning, having just learned that it was too expensive to bring a bike on the plane. With only a sleeping bag, his laptop, and his backpack filled with the "business casual" he and I had bought at store-closing time the night before - without transportation or a place to live in Kansas - he hugged us goodbye for twelve weeks. He will be working at a real paying job in his field of chemical engineering, and we are happy for him (even while I scan the weather reports for incipient tornados).

This is his third summer heading off into the unknown, but the first without an actual roof waiting to shelter him. After a school year of books, he welcomed an adventure. Though I'd wished for more certainty, he assured me his layover in Dallas would afford him a chance to search for an apartment and a bike to get to and from his job. The cash Robert handed him would tide Josh over for a few days if necessary, and my prayers surrounded him.

It is a truly wonderful thing to have a son whom you enjoy and in whom you have confidence. Compared to my usual pace of elder caregiving, it does feel like everything is a mad dash when he's around, since he accomplishes so much in so little time. He is capable and kind and, as always, I'm so proud to be his mom, so delighted to share a piece of his life.

A PRAYER

June 26

OK, I'll write it to You. Please bless my husband. Please make me a blessing to him.

Thank You that You have every day of our lives in Your plan, and You've already figured out how You're going to provide for us on each of those days.

Thank You for the home we're in now, how it is perfect for living with Gramma and Grampa, that they have their own bathroom, access to the outdoors, no stairs, the help we had in replacing stairs with a ramp and little steps, a bathroom with a window, room for all their needs - and ours. Yay, You!

And thank You that when it is time for us to move from here, You have the perfect place lined up for us already. Even if it doesn't look perfect at first, I know it will be because I've seen how each place You've put us has met the needs of that season of our lives.

Our season is changing. Gramma and Grampa have signed a lease in the Chicago area to move in on July 21. How they'll get there - even *if* they'll get there - is still a matter of suspense, but it feels like it is almost time for this chapter to end. Merie has just graduated from high school; Amanda has begun her profession and found what she hopes will be a long-time relationship with her new beau; Josh has begun his profession, earning money at it in

his summer job. With Gramma and Grampa leaving, and Merie off to college in ten weeks, it feels like You'll be turning the page for us to something new.

What will it be? I have no idea, but I know You, so I can be at peace. You are capable, as I've experienced, of picking us up and putting us exactly where we need to be, whether to serve or to be refreshed.

You know I want to feel like I'm contributing by helping, teaching, counseling, or something that feels useful. You also know I can be lazy and comfort-bound and prideful. So, I'll hand over all of my time to You to use in a way that pleases us both, how about that?

You also told me clearly in Your word that parents are to save up for children, not children for their parents, so I am looking to You to provide financially so our children don't have to worry they'll have to support us. Please provide me with work that I can be excited about. I know that satisfying work is a gift from You.

I have truly loved being a mom. There is almost nothing better than to have the joy of watching my kids grow and develop – except maybe the joy of having friendships with them, now that they're adults. Thank You so much for this wonderful gift.

As we wrap up this season, please help me to make good use of the time I have left with Merie and Gramma and Grampa, to say whatever needs to be said, to give them words and gestures of blessing.

Thank You so much for the caregiver You provided for the grandparents these last few months, the rest and care she's provided for me as well as for them. She says tomorrow is her last day, she's moving on. God, bless her, for she has surely blessed us.

Please help Pam make all the arrangements she needs to receive her folks. May the condo refurbishment come to a quick end and may it sell quickly, if for no other reason than to take the weight of it off Pam's and Grampa's shoulders. Please sustain the health of all of them and make them strong so they can enjoy their reunion. Make us wise as to how to orchestrate that reunion.

I'm so glad there's You, that You take care of everything for us, that You draw near to listen when we pray, that You are love, that You care so much about us, that no detail is too small or bothersome for us to take to You, that You are faithful and never turn away nor begrudge us, that You welcome Your children's voices even when they come full of requests. I love You, LORD. Thank You for letting me know You, for adopting me to be Your child. So good of You!

DEPARTURE GAIT

In the last couple of months, Merie has attended the senior prom, sung in her final high school concert, taken her last high school exams ever, graduated, and started a summer job. Josh has headed to a faraway state to start his career. Amanda brought her beau across the country to introduce him to us. They went to her high school best friend's wedding, then they left. My parents visited for Merie's graduation, and left, and friends from my distant past visited, then left.

Meanwhile, Gramma and Grampa are ready to leave. They have lived with us for a year, and the impetus to move back in again with their daughter, Pam, has been growing. They all miss each other.

Grampa doesn't want Pam to even visit us, though, until the condo refurbishment is complete, so Pam gives daily hour-long reports on the refurb progress by way of speaker phone. The appliances are in, but the condo still needs to be painted. A deck door needs to be installed, and she's waiting for the one installer in Illinois to be available to do the job. Then comes the new carpet. The market conditions are recited, other condos on the market are spoken of. Pam perseveres. It's exhausting to listen to.

And where will the grandparents move back to? Pam found them a house to rent. They found a different house. They decided to skip Illinois and go to Tennessee or Arizona. Maybe Florida? They found a house to buy in Illinois. It's perfect! Faxes went back and forth to the

bank. The morning of signing the purchase agreement, Grampa decided not to buy, that he was too old to be taking on a mortgage. Pam found an apartment. It is smaller than the too-small condo they were sharing before, but at least there are no stairs, and the garage is attached. They signed the contract. Move-in day is set for July 21. Three weeks.

Next, how to get the grandparents to Illinois? Pam had a great idea: rent a minivan, load up all their stuff, and stop at all the national parks between California and Illinois. Make the transit a vacation! There's so much to see! Everyone would have a great time! It would pass the (hypothetical) time between when Pam and her husband and dog and bird have to move out of the condo and when the apartment would be ready. A cousin would keep the bird, but the husband and dog would make the round trip with Pam. Grampa and Pam dreamed of natural beauty, sunshine, breezes, mountains and canyons. Gramma went to bed. I wrote Pam a checklist about what the daily needs of her parents are, and what she would have to do for them. She gave up on the idea of the vacation and spent a long time staring into space.

I took Grampa aside and told him they're welcome to stay here. We have no snow, we have room, we have an excellent caregiver, we have two additional adults to care for them, me and Robert. But he misses his friends. Never mind that one of his best friends lives half an hour from here and they haven't seen each other this entire year. Illinois is his home.

I sent Pam a detailed description of equipment she would need for Gramma and Grampa's bedroom and

bathroom – how many outlets they need to run their medical equipment, how much light they need at night, etc. I've written up their medication lists and their usual food intake. I've told her to get a caregiver at least twelve hours a day and to contact Meals on Wheels. I am terribly nervous for her. All the reasons her parents came to live with us in the first place still exist, and more, but longing and idealism have overtaken reality. They love each other, they want to be together. They want to go home. OK.

At lunch I reminded Grampa to plan to pay more for care in Illinois than they pay here because Robert and I work for them for free, and it takes three adults to care for the two of them. Pam's husband's disability means Pam will be trying to care for three disabled people, plus herself and the dog. "But Pam's going to get a job," Gramma piped in, then added dubiously, "and she has to have a knee operation before she gets a job. Or maybe she can get a sit-down job." We talked about how long it takes to recover from a knee operation. Grampa recalled his knee operation experience. It works fine now! He doesn't remember the recovery period. My anxiety for Pam grew.

"You have to look out for Pam," I said. "She can't just be taking care of you; you have to look out for her, too." "Pam's health is top priority," Grampa agreed. That's what he'd said before, when Pam called me a year ago in tears because she was so exhausted and sick from caring for them. He doesn't really get it. Grampa suggested maybe he could start preparing meals. He can barely stand. "Maybe you could make a sandwich while you're sitting at the table, but I don't see you preparing hot meals," I

countered. I know they don't like Meals on Wheels, but sanity is important, and I take any help I can get. I suspect part of the appeal of going back to Illinois is they think they'll be getting the sweets and custom-made meals they were having when Pam was their caregiver before. I'm trying to quash that idea. We conquered diabetes; let's not return to daily finger pricks.

And then I brought up the idea of a salary for Pam. "I don't think I can afford it," was Grampa's first response. I replied, "As far as I know, she's been working for you for two or three years, and you haven't paid her anything. How can she get health insurance, savings, money to buy herself a new dress or a cup of coffee?" We've had this conversation before, and it precipitated a small stroke as Grampa fretted over money during the night. I was concerned it would affect his health again, but the next day he was fine. Phew.

The plan is for Pam and her husband to move into the new apartment and get settled for three days. Then I am to escort Gramma and Grampa to Illinois, arriving on the night of July 24th. I am to stay a couple of days to ease Pam into her new life, then I will fly home. We'll probably have an extended family party to welcome them home before I leave. Grampa has commissioned me to buy the airline tickets. We're going.

Now comes packing and preparing. I wish Pam were lying on a beach somewhere, resting up. But I think she's dashing around madly, finishing her condo work and packing herself to move. I hope she will be ready, but I am so nervous about her picking up this load. I pray she's not

crushed, that she finds all the help she needs, just as it was provided for me.

The grandparents are leaving. With my two kids gone, the third on her way out, and with grandparents gone, the house will be empty except for Robert and me. In the midst of all this departure, even my eyebrows are deserting me, and I have to pencil in their replacements each morning. With what shall I pencil in replacements for these family members whom I've held close and dear for so long?

"First things first," my mother would say. Before I find replacements, I have to find boxes to pack in. And my search reminds me there will be some consolations to the departures: I might be able to start finding things in my garage again!

FOURTH OF JULY

Gramma asked at the breakfast table if there were a parade today, so I took Grampa; Gramma decided to nap. We parked a mile away because when you drive it doesn't seem that far, and I pushed Grampa in his wheelchair to our downtown. I supplied him with a water bottle and held an umbrella over the two of us for shade in the heat as we clustered with other parade enthusiasts of all ages and ethnicities. We watched an hour and a half of firefighters, veterans, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, gymnastics schools, a dog club, a bicycle club, Blue and Gold Star families (those who had family members currently serving in the armed forces, and those who'd lost a serving family member), marching bands, flag twirlers and baton twirlers, council members and a mayor, martial arts schools, vintage cars, a visiting children's choir from China, school bands, dance schools, clowns, the Hospital on Wheels van, the Chinese Club for Better Citizenship, the Afghan League for I can't remember what, the Rotarians, the Masons, giant inflated balloons, cartoon characters, historical patriotic figures, and two enormous helium balloons. When we got home Gramma asked, "Were there horses?" Sorry, Gramma, no horses.

There were also a handful of religious organizations represented. A Buddhist temple's sign was followed by ladies in traditional Thai costumes carrying bamboo parasols. A Christian church and school had their worship band on its float with "Welcome!" printed in umpteen languages. And a Sikh temple's float had men in

beards, turbans, and western clothes waving while their music belted out, “Proud to be an American, ‘cuz at least I know I’m free!”

Gosh, yes, I am grateful to be free.

I’ve been reading Khaled Hosseini’s book, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, about life in Afghanistan in the past forty plus years – invasion by Russia in 1979; then after their withdrawal in 1989, Afghan warlords fighting each other; the initial welcoming of the Taliban who seemed to bring peace; the terrible loss of freedom - especially for women - under the Taliban; the losses for all the country under the violent strife. I’ve also been reading *Inside the Revolution* by Joel Rosenberg about the conflict in Muslim-majority countries between radical fundamentalists and democratic reformers. Through my readings, I realized both Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini came to power in the same year, 1979. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi tells how a female college professor’s life in a free, western-style society changed to being under severe restrictions under Khomeini. For women under Khamenei in Iran, for women under the Taliban in Afghanistan, for women in Saudi Arabia, for women under Sharia law anywhere, there are so many restrictions, often including the inability to leave the house without a male relative, nor work outside the home, and sometimes being prohibited from education. Another recent read, *Nomad*, is Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s comparison of her life in five North African Muslim countries versus the relative freedom she found in western countries. I’ve

aimlessly wandered through the library and kept stumbling on a lack of freedom.

So, I am appreciating my freedom as a woman in the United States at this time. I am truly among the blessed. With a supportive, kind, non-violent husband, with a high level of education, with all the material goods and opportunities, with the community network and spiritual enlightenment I enjoy, I may be at the extreme end of the bell curve of the good life even in this country. The benefits of my life are, in part, possible because of the stated mission of our government: to secure our Creator-endowed rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It being Independence Day, I read through the Declaration of Independence – three times, in fact. It was that impressive. OK, I skipped the complaints against King George. For those who doubt the religious influence at our nation's origin, I noted four references to God in the Declaration: Nature's God who entitles people to equality, the Creator who endows with unalienable rights, the Supreme Judge of the world, and divine Providence who protects. And it says it is a duty to overthrow tyranny. In many countries, citizens have tried to overthrow tyrants, but ended up with worse oppression. I'm grateful that in our country's case, our Revolution ended up with our Constitution and Bill of Rights.

Reading the Declaration brings me to thinking about the *expression* of freedom. With the grandparents I watched "A Capitol Fourth" on TV for the first time, and pondered how those particular performers, songs, and audience members were selected to celebrate and express

the idea of freedom that was repeatedly proclaimed. Later, from a high vantage point, I watched the fireworks and heard the concussions from many communities. After my reading this week, I felt grateful that it was merely the *symbol* of "the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air" which secured our freedom that I was hearing, and not actual bombs. As I watched the fireworks, I thought over the day and how many times during the parade, during our televised nation's birthday party, and during the reading of the Declaration of Independence I had come upon the word or synonym for freedom. I mulled what, exactly, freedom is.

Freedom can't be the ability to just do whatever you want because that can end up harmful to oneself or to others. And it's not the absence of laws. A good parent provides her child with structure – also known as rules, boundaries, limitations – to facilitate healthy growth. Eating only candy might sound like freedom to a child, but it is not what the body is made for, and would, in fact, limit the child's abilities. Licentiousness - anarchy - bears no resemblance to the liberty our Creator endowed us with a right to; it is, rather, a perversion and desecration of our freedom, and so it is *less* than freedom. It's certainly not what the Founding Fathers had in mind, because their Declaration did not only "dissolve the political bands" which tied them to Great Britain, but they also instituted a new government.

As I considered the intrinsic constraints of freedom, a passage from Saint Paul's letter to residents of Galatia in Türkiye came to mind: "You, my brothers and sisters, were

called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love."

Freedom is our calling, our vocation, that for which we strive for ourselves and for others. While fireworks and flag waving express celebration and appreciation for freedom, the true expression of freedom is love. Therefore, I can test myself when I claim to be free to do something: "Is this done in love? Am I able to do this with humility? Am I serving another, or am I just being self-indulgent?" These are questions to ask of ourselves in the international sphere as well as in the personal.

The Sikh parade float had a sign on it, "Service to humanity." Those bearded, turbaned men playing "Proud to be an American" expressed the ideal: To be American is to be free to serve. As I enjoy my freedom and consider those who suffer under various forms of oppression, I'll try to remember that the way to express my freedom best is to "serve one another humbly in love."

REGRETS? I HAVE A FEW

As my time as caregiver for my elderly in-laws is coming to an end, several emotions and thoughts about my work for them come to mind. Most of what I feel is guilty. I feel I should have done better by them, that I didn't make the most of the time we had, I didn't care enough, I didn't try hard enough. My overall feeling about their stay is: shame.

At the same time, while I have them for two more weeks, I am not interested in changing, re-investing, being with them more, being with them at all. I want to escape their ongoing neediness – both for tangible help and for my attention, entertaining, emotional upbuilding. I'm not able to redeem my shame by a last-ditch effort to make a grand finale.

I took a course this week for therapists called "Fundamentals of Trauma Processing," which I thought would be unrelated to my current life and just be preparation for my post-eldercare job. But it gave me some perspective on the impact of any kind of caregiving. It relieved me to learn there is a term for me, and other helpers, called "Compassion Fatigue." Feeling like a failure and distancing are normal signs of helpers' burnout.

At the beginning of their one year stay with us, it was fun. I was learning new things, I was growing, I was making a difference. I had high "Compassion Satisfaction." I was industrious and efficacious.

But I tired. After three months of caring for Gramma and Grampa on my own, we hired help one day each week, which helped alleviate my fatigue and gave me a change of pace to look forward to.

After six months of being with us, the grandparents began to plan to return to Illinois. Once they decided to leave me, they stopped being *my own*, like my children, and became a temporary job. I lost much of my enthusiasm and mentally began just waiting it out.

Gramma and Grampa's needs increased, and we hired help five mornings each week. This was lovely for me because I made it clear that the helper was not only giving Gramma and Grampa showers and meals, but she was also there to support me so I could minister to them the other nineteen hours of the day. She changed my sheets for me each week, washed the kitchen floor when it needed it, and managed the laundry. Bliss! That part was very nurturing. But regarding the grandparents' care, I moved from being their caregiver to care manager, another step of distancing.

The grandparents spent all day in their room; Gramma didn't want to go anywhere, and Grampa didn't want to leave her, so I only saw them at mealtimes. I took a trip at the nine-month mark and left them in the care of Robert and the caregiver for a week. This increased Robert's involvement with and investment in his parents' care, and once I returned from the trip, he continued to be the first responder whenever he was home, often shooing me out for the evening so I could have a break. Two more steps of distance.

I'd heard that at the end of life, loved ones pull away from a terminally ill patient. But I couldn't believe I'd ever do that. No! I'd be the exception! Well, actually, I'm not. When someone is leaving me, it looks like I keep pace in moving away, too. Here at the end of their stay with me, I skitter in and out of conversations with them. A quick kiss and "How did you sleep last night?" then I'm out of the breakfast area and they're on their own with the caregiver. I'm not proud of it, but now I better understand others' limitations in caregiving.

The one thing I'm glad of, as I reflect, is that *when* we're together we are kind to each other. I attribute that to Grampa's resolve to "smile and keep my mouth shut." His gentle humor and determined cooperation have made a positive emotional environment for all of us. I continue to learn from their graciousness and humility and acceptance. There is nothing very wonderful about being in your mid-eighties, housebound, feeble, with people who don't really want to be with you. But they carry this trial in a beautiful way, with gratitude for all the simple and tiny gifts their life offers. What an inspiring example! God, help me to be humble enough to bless them to the end.

HEADING OUT

Before leaving home to start as a freshman at a college ten hours away, Merie, busy packing up her life and spending one last time with high school buddies, decided to take a day off to go to the beach. She invited me to go with her to a secluded crescent of sand bound by cliffs reaching out into the ocean on each side. We tromped through fields of Brussels sprouts and down dirt paths and found ourselves mostly alone on the beach on that lovely day.

Merie had her swimsuit on under her clothing, so as soon as she arrived at the water's edge she peeled off her clothes and marched right in. She swam straight out – and swam, and swam, and swam and swam, and *swam*, until her head was just a tiny dot. My eyes never left her, or I wouldn't have been able to find her.

At first, I was enjoying her capability, thinking how wonderful that she is such a strong swimmer! I'm glad for those swimming lessons and opportunities we provided to develop her confidence in the water! And no wonder she won ribbons on the swim team! But then I got a little uncomfortable as she got beyond my voice. She was going pretty far, and she wouldn't hear me if I called. But if she just came back now, I could tolerate the distance.

I became more anxious as she got beyond my reach if for any reason I had to swim to her. I had to talk to myself a lot about not scolding her for getting beyond where I was comfortable. My comfort level shouldn't constrain my child from challenging herself, I said. My

desire for her safety would always keep her back by my side, but that wouldn't help her to become all she could be, I said. A mother's love for her child means she has to suffer awareness of the child's vulnerability and be unable to rescue - yet still support the child's growth and autonomy, I said. I recalled times I'd let my other children out of reach. They'd survived. I'd survived. This experience was going to keep happening. This is what it means to be a good mother: you let your child strain out of your arms, even when it scares you. A child explores beyond mom's comfort in so many dimensions. A mom's job is to be as reliable as the shore and pray that the child makes it back safely. That's what I said to myself. What else could I say?

By then Merie was way too far for me to ever help her if a shark or cramp should attack. I was tempted to panic. I felt helpless, powerless, I was trying not to be angry in my anxiety. I couldn't help her; there was no one around who could help her. It was all up to her and God. And then it struck me: *This* is "going to college." She'll be mostly out of reach and out of sight, vulnerable and risk-taking, yet confident and stretching. In many ways, beyond me. Sigh. I felt loss, I grieved, even as I acknowledged pleasure in her competence.

At the apex of her swim, having reached her goal of swimming out beyond the encircling cliffs, she turned and waved to me. She was delighted with her accomplishment, she'd achieved her goal, she would have a relaxed swim back to me, filled with the satisfaction that comes from having seized a challenge and conquered. I myself did not

often have those brief successes; at my time of life, conquering my challenges takes months or years of perseverance. But I knew the feeling of success, and I celebrated for her. I met her with a towel and a hug, and we shared our experiences of the event. Then she lay down to read a book and I, secure that she was safely on land, could go do my own exploring along the shore, finding rock formations, sea lions, otters, birds.

Grief clutches me in the first acute awareness that I'll be losing her to college. I will need to begin my own explorations, finding a daily world that doesn't include her, as hers won't include me. But we'll talk about our worlds and our explorations, and that bridge will help.

I'll miss her, though. I'll miss how she sings around the house when she is having a good day, how she lets me express my exorbitant opinions without getting upset by them, how she tells me not to wear that, how she explains the intricacies of high school relationships, how she recites the day's events, tells me her happy times, squeezes in next to me on the couch. I'll miss her beauty and her energy, but I am happy she can swim far beyond me, then turn, and wave.

THE GREAT GRANDPARENT EXODUS

Dear praying friends,

I would appreciate your lifting us up to our loving, almighty Father in your prayers as we prepare to move Gramma and Grampa back to Illinois. They miss their daughter Pam and their home, so chose to go back. They will be moving into an apartment with Pam and her husband.

The specifics:

- Pam and her husband move into the apartment on July 21st.

- I will be flying with Gramma and Grampa on July 24th to bring them to their new apartment.

- Grampa needs a hospital bed in the apartment when he arrives.

- We need to pack and transport one motorized wheelchair, two regular wheelchairs, two walkers, oxygen equipment, special bathroom equipment, special bed equipment, medicines, important papers, and all the other normal stuff (winter and summer clothing), in addition to the two grandparents. Much of this has to be packed at the last minute. Grandparents will need bathroom stops and food stops during the day. The flight is only four hours, but the whole day's excursion will take closer to ten hours.

- Robert will load the van and take us from home to the airport. We need sufficient vehicle(s) to pick us up from the airport at the other end.

- Our paperwork for oxygen, etc. needs to clear the airline before we can get on the plane. I have to manage documentation for three people plus medical equipment (doctor prescriptions, battery approval, etc.) and luggage.

- We need help from curb to airplane/airplane to curb at each airport.

- When we arrive at the apartment, we will be tired but will need to unpack a lot of stuff for the grandparents to get all they need in order to be able to sleep.

- I will stay in Chicago until July 27th to help everyone settle in.

- Pam needs a reliable caregiver to help her take care of the grandparents.

- Meanwhile, Merie will be going on a one-week road trip with another 18-year-old.

THANK YOU for praying as the Lord leads you. I am completely dependent on His mercies for this venture, as I well know from having done it a year ago. And I am so grateful to have you in my life to help us on our way!

And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. [38] *But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"* [39] *And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.* [40] *He said to them, "**Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?**"* [41] *And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"* (From the biography of Jesus by Mark, 4th chapter.)

Yes, why am I so anxious about the future? Have I not been given ample evidence of God's power to act on my behalf? This passage demonstrates what happens with me all the time: threatened by circumstances, I focus on them and become afraid. God steps in, and I am reminded of the absurdity of my misplaced fear.

Last night I sent out a request for prayer about the specifics of moving the grandparents back to Chicago, a very daunting circumstance. As soon as folks began praying, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" popped out at me. Then I began remembering some of the times God spoke to calm the storm for me. A tiny sampling of my memories of when I saw God in action on my behalf:

One of the first times I remember noticing God at work for me was when my car died right on the train track, with a train due any minute. Before I could get out of the car, three or four men surrounded my car, directed me to steer, and moved it over to the side of the road. Before I could thank them, they had disappeared. I got out and looked around, but they were nowhere to be seen.

In grad school, being a mom, running a home, I looked out the window at the New England leaves accumulating, ruining the lawn, and asked God for help since I didn't have time to rake them. God sent a wind, and the whole yard was beautifully, completely cleared of leaves.

Pregnant and with two little ones, preparing to sell our home of 11 years, I wished for help cleaning the bathrooms. Later that day I ran into an acquaintance at the post office who insisted - without my asking - on coming over to help. With her daughter, she came and cleaned my bathrooms. Two other friends came over and cleaned my kitchen. I didn't have to ask. A neighbor offered to supervise the movers, since I'd already be gone. When I needed help, people came out of the woodwork.

When Merie was a toddler, an older child playing with her dropped her on her head onto cement. In the emergency room I cried out to the nurse when our baby began to lose consciousness, but the nurse said there was nothing that could be done. I cried out to Jesus, and Merie was pulled back to consciousness immediately.

The trip Merie and I took to France was one lesson after another about God's provision. One example: We chatted with a girl on a train in the south of France. *Four hundred miles and two weeks later*, lost in Paris, I prayed for God to "pull a big one out of Your hat." *The same girl* was on our bus. She got off the bus with us, walked us to her sister at the tourist information booth, then to our hotel, then to the grocery store before going on to her evening plans.

A mom asked me to tutor her nine-year-old son as his three-year-old sister played nearby. Later, we moved across the country. One day, I asked God if I should do a side-hustle to earn money. *On that very day*, that same mom - whom I had not heard from *in twelve years* - called me to request I tutor her daughter who was now a high school freshman.

There is more, much more. Every day has its heaps of protections and provisions, of beauties innumerable and mostly unnoticed.

In sum: God knows the desires of my heart, and He often answers them before I even ask. When it is time for a change, He orchestrates the change with a swoop. Sometimes there's a lot of waiting before the time is ripe. God protects and provides. He usually uses people, but He also uses angels and circumstances. He has destinations for me, people to be blessed by. He is generous, and He doesn't act based on whether I deserve His favor or not. So truly, I have no reason to fear, and every reason to have faith. Such uplifting memories!

TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACK

Sunday

It has taken almost twelve months to get to this point where the grandparents can return to Pam's care. Pam has found a home for her parents to move into back in Illinois. We have plane reservations, we saw the doctor for a final checkoff, I've got documents for the oxygen machine and the electric wheelchair and our other stuff to be permitted on the plane. I've got my lists of the documents I need and the items to carry on; I've packed everything we don't need for our last few days in California. We are ready for takeoff on Wednesday.

But Grampa got sick.

His back has been hurting him – he said it was an old high school injury that gets out of joint sometimes – so he hasn't been sleeping well this week. On Friday, Robert took his folks to Muir Woods for a last hurrah, and they had dinner at a sandwich shop. Yesterday morning, I fed Grampa two eggs, two pieces of cinnamon toast, a banana, a peach, and two cups of decaf. Grampa has a good appetite. But he didn't want lunch, and he didn't want dinner. As my mom would say, he was off his feed. Not a good sign. He said he had a stomachache, and what can you do for a stomachache except apply Pepto Bismol and wait it out?

Grampa tried going to bed. Not comfortable. He tried sitting up. Still not comfortable. I couldn't think of

anything I could do except hover and fuss, and I didn't think that would help him get to sleep, so I left. At one a.m. Robert got up for the nightly assistance in changing Grampa's colostomy bag – and Grampa threw up three times. The two of them concluded it must have been food poisoning from the sandwich shop and went back to bed.

Sunday morning, I came downstairs in my bathrobe with my hair awry to make my latte and homemade waffles. Robert was dressed for his run; Merie was asleep after her late-night catering for a wedding. We were planning to go to church at 10:45. I got Robert's report on how Grampa's night had been, and I asked Robert to check on his dad before he went for his run.

Without his usual vigor, Grampa staggered into the kitchen under Robert's supervision and plopped down in his chair. Almost immediately he began vomiting what looked like black coffee. I grabbed the phone and dialed 911. Grampa became semi-conscious, breathing deeply and slowly, very pale, unresponsive to questions. While Robert yelled questions at Grampa and tried to mop up, I answered the 911 lady's questions. (If you're not good in an emergency when you're frightened, I suggest posting your address and phone number and people's birthdates, health conditions, etc. on the inside of your cupboard because there's a lot of data they ask while you're in shock.)

In less than five minutes we had about seven burly men in our kitchen – firemen and ambulance men. More questions. Diabetes? Finger prick. Sugar's good. How long? When did it start? They're firing questions at

us. What medicines does he take? When did he last eat? Has this happened before? Meanwhile, someone's trying to do a mental status exam on Grampa. Can you hear me? Do you know where you are? Other folks are calling out the numbers they're getting about his blood pressure, oxygen level, etc. Then, all at once they're clustered around him, lift him into a wheelchair, roll him out the door. The oxygen they've put him on – or something – has revived him enough that he's answering questions now. I'm in the front yard, still in my bathrobe, handing over lists of medications, telling them which hospital, watching Grampa get loaded into the ambulance while some of the gentlemen are relaxed, chatty, haven't we been here before? "Yes," I say, "this is Grampa's fourth trip by ambulance this year." But it's the only time he's vomited blood.

Back indoors, Robert and I discuss who should go to the hospital and who should stay home. I'm the designated homestayer, and I try to go about the business of cleaning up. But I get teary – I always react after the fact, which makes me good in a crisis but a bowl of melting Jello afterward – so I took the opportunity to sob into Robert's shoulder when it came near.

Then I thought that Grampa's arrival at the hospital would be an important communication time, and since I'm the primary caregiver, I decided to go. I rushed upstairs, threw on some clothes and went speeding to the hospital. I got there before the ambulance, but I was detained in the security system. Robert eluded it, but still the two of us were stuck in a "Quiet Room" until medical staff were

ready to talk to us. We had asked Gramma if she wanted to go, but she said she was going back to bed, there was nothing she could do. Later, when her nighttime sleeping pill had worn off, she didn't remember that conversation and was mad as hops for us not bringing her to the hospital. But I didn't know.

The stroke nurse came in to tell us Grampa hadn't had a stroke. OK, I knew that. "We think he has sepsis," he said. "Sepsis can be fatal in someone of his age. If you catch it early enough, they can recover." OK, that's not what I was ready to hear – 'fatal' – but I figured we had caught it early enough. X-ray, CAT scan, blood work, urine test, oxygen, heart monitor, etc. were all in process, and then they let us in. "We can hear something in his lungs; there are red blood cells in his urine. He's hardly excreting anything. It's sepsis, which is a bacterial infection." Bacterial infection? Pfft. I've had plenty of those, and I know just what to do. Give the man an antibiotic, and he'll be fine in 24 hours. But no, they're going to keep him overnight. He won't be going to Chicago on Wednesday.

And that's where we are now, Sunday evening. Grampa's spending tonight in the hospital. He's hallucinating, gently at first, but more and more agitated, getting disoriented. More X-rays, something about his abdomen, oxygen levels, etc. I took Gramma to the hospital, answered half an hour of questions from the nurse – are there ramps in his home? Is there a bathroom on the first floor? Does he have a family history of diabetes, cancer, heart disease? I just said it doesn't matter what his family history is since we know *he* does have all of these,

right? Then I took Gramma home and fed her and put her to bed, called Pam and the relatives to let them know the status of everything, and waited for Robert to come home.

But he just called. He's two hours later getting home than he'd expected. There's talk of heart failure, restraints, the doctor's been called again. I'm on my way back to the hospital.

THE WILD RIDE

Sunday and Monday

At Disney parks there is a ride in which passengers are jerked hither and yon, doors open and close unexpectedly, the scenery changes drastically; the whole thing is a little befuddling. My memory of it is that it's more exhausting than exhilarating. It's a pretty apt expression of how this past week went.

Grampa was taken by ambulance to the emergency room Sunday morning, then admitted to the hospital, and I settled him into his room. It was postulated that he had a blockage in his intestine. The backup caused his intestine to swell and as the walls of the intestine became thinner, normal bacteria seeped from the intestine into the rest of the body, making him septic and making him vomit. He'd breathed in some of what he'd thrown up, so he had liquid in his lung, or pneumonia. He was on an IV to hydrate him and a catheter to monitor his urine output, which was nearly zilch.

He began getting reality and hallucinations confused. He pantomimed making a phone call, but he knew I was there and could tell me to "Call Pam." I think he knew he was in trouble, because he said he was trying to write to his lawyer, conscientious man that he is, always looking out for his family. He kept trying to get out of bed, but we persuaded him it was time to go to sleep, stay in bed, he was going to sleep here. "Sweet dreams, Dad. I

love you!" "I love you, too." Robert took the watch, and I went home. But when Robert called to say Grampa was getting agitated, I returned to the hospital.

When I arrived, three nurses and a doctor were working vigorously on Grampa, getting a blood sample, getting his vital signs, restraining him, trying to get a tube down his nose. Grampa had just vomited some two liters of black liquid that looked nothing like breakfast. They wanted to pump out his stomach. Unfortunately, no one knew he had a deviated septum until days later, so I watched as they tried to cram two feet of tubing into his nostril. When that didn't work, they discussed alternatives: should they try a smaller size tube? Pediatric size? Go down his throat? Robert and I had different reactions to this drama. He stayed in the corner watching the ball game and letting the professionals do their job. I stood at the foot of the bed, vigilant and involved, trying not to give advice.

Once Grampa was settled again, I told Robert I'd take over the watch, and he went home. I've learned with hospital staff they can't tell you what you as a family member should do, so you have to ask them, "If it were *your* dad, would you stay the night?" All three health professionals vigorously nodded their heads. Eagerly, they brought me a pillow and blankets, and a toothbrush. Just in case, I had brought a change of underwear and a sweater with me to the hospital. I took a quick shower with the doors to Grampa's room and the hallway open, then tried to fall asleep in the hospital chair, waking up whenever he coughed.

I was asleep at 3 a.m. when nurses rushed in and announced they were moving him to the Intensive Care Unit. Something about his breathing and heart rate had sounded a remote alarm. Groggily I collected my purse, stuffed my shoes into a personal effects bag, along with the change of clothes in which we hoped to bring Dad home. There was a tense busyness and waiting for transport to move him, but the nurse tried to reassure me that they'd rather expected all along that he'd end up in the ICU, it was normal, there they could watch him more closely. As with the ambulance arrival at our home, there were a lot of questions: What effects did Grampa have with him? Wedding ring, hearing aid, clothes bag. I didn't know if his shoes were here or at home.

Grampa was unconscious. The nurse asked me, had he designated anyone as his medical power of attorney? Yes, me. That made me the final say on all his health care. Was it ok to put him on oxygen? Put a catheter in the side of his neck to administer medicines? Put one in his wrist to check his vital signs more directly?

On a sunny day back in October I'd sat with Gramma and Grampa on our patio, surrounded by soft air and flowers, and asked them questions from a form the doctor had given us. Whom do you want to make your healthcare decisions if you can't? What do you want done with your body when you die? If you're very sick, what do you want people to try? What makes life worth living? Grampa's answers were much on my mind. He had said clearly that he wanted us to give him one good try - and then let him go. Catheters and IVs didn't seem like

extraordinary measures to me, so that was ok. Gramma is on oxygen every day of her life, so that seemed ok, too. I signed a paper while sleep and adrenalin battled in my body.

In the ICU, Grampa was unconscious and was hooked up to a ventilator – a one-inch diameter tube extended from his throat to a machine that regulated how often breath was pumped into him. Another tube came out of his mouth with a suction function for taking stuff out of his lungs. A third tube went down his esophagus into his stomach to pump out the black fluid. A band wrapped around his head over his ears and under his nose to support all these tubes in place. About six more tubes ran to the one needle in his neck, which was covered by a bandage. Antibiotics, hydration, blood pressure support, and a sedative all fed into him. Two nurses sat staring at him and the two monitors hooked up to him. They would turn him every two hours, type into their laptops on their rolling desks every flicker of an eyelid, every adjustment that was made to him. He was officially on life support, but I didn't realize it yet.

While he was being settled into the ICU, the overseeing physician came. I asked, "Is it time to call his daughter to come?" Yes. The hospital spiritual adviser came to ask me what I wanted, what Grampa wanted. It is her job to coordinate with priests, ministers, etc. according to what the family wants. She has an open and sympathetic face and is willing to listen if I want to talk. I don't. I'm in action mode.

I call Pam. “Come.” Pam starts to cry. As kindly as I can, I tell her to work the logistics of a plane flight, transportation to the airport, whatever she needs to do to get here now, and save the emotions for later. She can cry after she’s made it through airport security. We’ll pick her up when she arrives. Her voice strengthens with resolve. She can do this; she has much to do.

Pam is scheduled to move into an apartment today; the movers are coming this afternoon. Gramma and Grampa were planning to fly to her in two days and move in with her. All the family is set for a big transition. There’s to be a welcome home party on Saturday. We have a lot of plans to undo.

I call our kids, Josh in Kansas and Amanda in Washington, DC, to let them know what’s going on. Amanda offers help. “See if you can postpone the apartment and help Auntie Pam find a plane ticket,” I direct her. Amanda is great with logistics. It feels good that she’s in charge. I call my mom. Time for a little comfort, the comfort that comes from downloading all that’s happened so far.

I realize I need a friend with me. I've called my nurse practitioner friend Laura Jo, but she's in Mexico. I would call my physician friend Carol, but she's in Cleveland. I call Florence, who unexpectedly has the day off work. She comes to sit with me as I call and console Merie, field professionals, answer phone calls. We barely exchange two sentences, but the fact that she came for me is a great comfort.

Merie joins me later, and we have a pleasant visit with one another, chatting over Grampa's tummy as we stand across his bed from each other. We often address him in our conversation even though he is unconscious. I know Grampa likes to be clean, so I ask the nurse's permission to give Grampa a shampoo, and the nurse graciously sets me up with soapy water and washcloths. Grampa is a mouth breather, and I'm concerned his mouth is dry. The nurse gets me some sponge-on-a-stick things, and I give Grampa a swab now and then. I resolve to bring clippers to cut his finger- and toenails tomorrow. We laugh and talk. I tell the nurse that Meredith, at the age of 15, had a job watching over a lady in a coma living in her daughter's house. The lady had had a tracheotomy, so all this suction, catheter, turning, ventilator, etc. is familiar to Merie. The nurse is impressed; he says he "had to mature quite a lot" at age 22 when he went from nursing school to working with actual patients.

Later, Robert is with Grampa and sends me home to rest, but I'm on organizational overdrive. What else do we need? Prayer, first. I text a few people to get prayer started. Later I will email about twenty folks I know who pray. I also need a local organizer/ information gatherer. Whom do I know? I call Debbie.

"Hi Debbie. I have a weird request, and it is perfectly fine if you say no. Grampa is very sick in the hospital, and I've never been down this path before. I wonder if you could find out about ...um…uh...cremation services for me. I'm looking for reasonable prices, and I think it's better finding out ahead of time than in the throes

of grief when they've got you over a barrel. Grampa wants his ashes taken to Illinois, so we'd need them in a portable…." I peter out as I get to specifics, too unimaginable. "It's fine if you want to say no."

Debbie, bless her, is right on it. She just had a loved one pass two weeks ago, unbeknownst to me, so she emails the information to me within fifteen minutes. I don't look at it; it is enough that it is there. She also asks me what else I need, and organizes my friends to bring us meals, starting with her bringing us dinner tonight. Thank God for Debbie, for friends, for the body of Christ that gives so generously.

I need an information disseminator, so I contact Jean for one circle of friends. My mom covers my side of the family, Bonnie and Sandy have other family branches. My mom has also notified her church to pray. I put an automatic response on my email account saying why I'm unavailable.

When I feel I've done all I can do, I lie down for about an hour, then it's time for Gramma and me to go to the airport. Pam arrives about 8 p.m., ready to cry, but I've met her at the top of the stairs, in sight of Gramma but out of earshot, so I can ease them into each other's presence. I lighten the atmosphere by making Pam laugh about Gramma's new hairdo. Pam is all smiles when she hugs Gramma, and we go straight to the hospital. I warn them on the way what Grampa looks like with all his tubes, but it is still a shock when Pam sees him, and she has to step away to recover. I explain that, although he isn't conscious, the doctor says patients who've come out from

sedation say they remember and could hear what was going on. So, when we talk to Grampa, we are happily reminiscing and not talking about any worries we have.

But this is so hard for Pam. She had hoped to have Gramma and Grampa in her home, caring for them, making up for being on caregiver burnout when she was last with them. Because of working on refurbishing and selling her parents' condo and caring for her husband, Pam hasn't seen her folks for a full year. Now this. Pam is heartbroken, but she resolves to determinedly hope for Grampa's complete recovery.

Gramma is delighted to see Pam again. She has more energy than I've seen all year, she stays up three or four hours later than ever. We leave Grampa to rest under the nurses' care – they tell us he needs a break from all our chatter – and head home to bed. Pam will sleep in Grampa's bed to be close to Gramma, and so that Gramma won't have to face an empty room. Robert and I are tickled to hear Pam and Gramma, so glad to be reunited, talking and giggling together as we fall asleep.

FROM TUESDAY ON

Tuesday morning of Grampa's stay in the Intensive Care Unit, I awoke with anxiety about my responsibility. I was Grampa's advocate. It was up to me to make sure he didn't linger unnecessarily. Pam, newly arrived from Chicago after not seeing him for a year, needed time to say goodbye, I knew, but her needs had to be balanced against his expressed wishes, and that was my job. It was my job to say, "Time's up." But when was that?

The tension about that responsibility was relieved when I discussed it with the doctor Grampa has had for the last year. "He wanted a good try. That's what we're giving him," she said. "Let us try for 48 to 72 hours. We can have a family meeting tomorrow morning to decide what to do."

On Tuesday we learned to study the monitors, especially the colorful ones. The top line, the green graph, reflected Grampa's heart rate. When there were little white dots over each beat, it meant his heart wasn't beating on its own and had been prompted by his pacemaker. There were a lot of white dots. Next to the graph was a number that indicated how many beats he had per minute. The pacemaker had been set to 60 fifteen years ago when he got his quadruple bypass, and it was still keeping time.

Under the heartrate line was a red line indicating Grampa's blood pressure, with numbers next to it giving the sorts of numbers you hear when you go for a checkup, and then, in parentheses, the average of the two numbers, what the nurses called the MAP number. It looked like

145/45 (68). I can never remember what the ratio is supposed to be, what a "good" blood pressure is, but the nurse said the MAP was supposed to stay at 65 or above. Grampa was getting medicine, "pressers," to keep it that way. Basically, they were pumping adrenalin into his system. My system had plenty to spare.

In dark blue was his CVP graph, central venous pressure. We received various vague explanations that this had to do with his heart fluid balance and functioning, but the main idea was that the number had to stay above 10. The next graph, light blue, was Grampa's blood oxygen saturation level, which had to stay above 92%. His respirations were in white, each breath a peak on the graph. Twenty breaths per minute is good. Much more than that indicates distress; much less means he's not breathing often enough. We spent days staring at those numbers and lines, checking for any fluctuation, any sign of hope or loss. We also received reports several times a day about his temperature. We had to keep reminding ourselves to get our eyes off the data and look at Grampa.

Tuesday night Grampa was running a fever. His kidneys weren't working, his lungs were full of fluid, his intestines had shut down. We were handed photographs taken of his innards: an enormous bleeding hernia, a "shredded" esophagus, some healthy and lots of unhealthy tissue. The gastroenterologist visited us. He'd tried but been unable to undo any kink. Or was it scar tissue? The surgeon visited us. Grampa wasn't a good candidate for surgery.

Sometimes we found ourselves thinking of Grampa's body almost as a machine, with functioning and nonfunctioning parts. We'd recently been down this same road – it *felt* the same, almost – with our kids' aging car. Are the parts replaceable? Can we get it running again? Although it may sound disrespectful, seeing our bodies as this fascinating, complex design actually gave me more respect for this structure we live in. So many systems have to cooperate and balance and interact for Grampa to walk to the breakfast table, as he had just a few days ago. Such an elaborate, precisely designed complexity of systems is impressive!

But those systems weren't working. We hadn't set a time for our family meeting with the doctor, but we were all dreading it. Instead of zipping over to the hospital at dawn on Wednesday, we dawdled and arrived about 10:30 a.m. I parked awkwardly and had trouble getting Gramma out of the van and into her wheelchair. Our kind doctor met us at the curb, helped us extract Gramma, then got down on her knees on the sidewalk so she could talk to Gramma eye to eye. "We have good news!" she said. Grampa's temperature was normal. He had started making urine. His heart was beating regularly without the pacemaker's intervention. The plan for the day was to take him off sedation and let him wake up. Pam was disappointed to learn it would take him six to eight months to recover enough to travel back to Chicago. She decided to move to California. We relinquished the apartment they were all supposed to move into that very day and went in to celebrate Grampa getting better.

We spent the day singing his favorite songs, urging him to wake up so that uncomfortable tube could come out of his throat, telling him we love him, crying because we were missing him, thanking him for being such a wonderful man, telling him we appreciated all he'd done for us, reminding him of trips we'd been on with him, promising to feed him his favorite mocha pound cake when he woke up.

He didn't wake up. A minister came by and sang over him, "Sweep Over My Soul," which was so soothing to us all. We requested "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" as a reminder of where our strength lies. Songs like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "I've Got a Home in Glory Land" were on my mind, but I refrained from singing them. I didn't want to give Grampa any ideas about leaving us.

Thursday was the same. Pam wept buckets, so sad he was ill, so missing him. All day we urged him to return to us. "Wake up! You've slept long enough!" Gramma scolded him as she held his hand. On the phone, my mother hinted that folks who don't wake up after two days off sedation may not wake up at all. We scheduled another family meeting for Friday night. The doctor ordered a brain scan and an abdominal scan with contrast, now that his kidneys were functioning. With more information we could make more confident decisions. The doctor asked me if we'd picked out a mortuary; she gave me a list of them and suggested we begin to make arrangements.

Merie took to hanging out with friends. Robert took to vigorously battling our backyard gophers. All of us

switched from hospital to home and returned to bedside off and on through the day. At one point, as Pam was driving between the home and the hospital, she couldn't remember which one she was heading to. Life was a blur between the two; the world outside ceased to exist except as a repository for our daily reports to our support networks.

"We love you, Dad. We love you so much!" he heard over and over again on Friday as we wept and longed for him, studied his graphs and numbers, dreaded the meeting, felt its impending decision. As the day wore on, we noticed Grampa seemed to be in pain. His respirations were high, and his forehead creased.

On Friday evening we gathered in a little room, the Bioethics Library of the hospital, and decided on the ethics of medicine in his case.

At breakfast that day I'd said to Gramma, "How are you?"

"Good. How are you?"

"I'm sad," I said, "because Dad is sick, it's very serious, and he might not get well."

She seemed surprised. Pam has been clinging to hope and determined to see Grampa recover, and perhaps that flavor had colored Gramma's view. She blinked and lowered her head. Once she digested the possibility of the situation, she looked up and asked, "When will the doctor decide to pull the plug?"

"The doctor won't decide. It's up to us to decide and tell the doctor our decision," I answered. Pause. I asked her, "What do *you* think we should do?"

"I think we should let him go."

At our meeting in the Bioethics Library, the doctor showed us the latest pictures – a brain scan that ruled out any stroke (which would have made our decision clearer), and an abdominal scan that showed how disrupted his innards were.

Gramma reiterated her decision. "We should let him go."

Although she has a little dementia and can't remember everything, on this it felt like she could understand enough to make the call. She has lived with him for sixty years; she deserved the first opinion. Her making it gave everyone else freedom to let him go also, believing it was best for him. But before we agreed, we asked questions and told the doctor we wanted him to be pain-free, to slip away in his sleep. Was that possible? Yes.

We all marched grimly back to his bedside, kissed him and loved on him, said our goodbyes, then stepped outside the curtain while tubes were extracted. Merie stayed and watched; Robert left to remember his dad as he'd always known him and to take Gramma home to bed. The nurses cleaned Dad up, put in a cannula (an oxygen tube like Gramma always wears) to keep him comfortable, and took the IV out of his wrist. They left in the IV feeding into his neck so he could have sedation and

nutrition. We all agreed we weren't going to starve or dehydrate him. This was going to be as gentle a goodnight as possible.

Pam had told me Grampa had said on the phone a week ago, "I can't wait to have my arms around you." When it was just me and Pam with Grampa, I encouraged her to climb up onto the bed and lie next to him on the side without medical interventions. She put her head on his shoulder and kissed his neck while I wrapped his arms around her so they could hold each other. Grampa was so peaceful, his numbers steady, he looked like he was having a good snooze. After a while, when nothing about his condition changed, I settled Pam with a blanket in a chair for her to keep watch overnight while I went home to bed.

Saturday morning, we returned early. As I had all week, I found I needed to do *something* to minister to him, I couldn't just stand there. I swabbed moisture onto his tongue, including apple juice, since he's always had a sweet tooth. I rubbed lotion onto his lips to keep them from getting chapped. I washed him. I rearranged his blanket and sheet to keep him cool, keep him warm. I monitored the monitors. I asked the nurse about his temperature. I pointed out a bruise. I removed an old bandage. I asked the nurse to remove his wedding ring, which felt awfully final. I asked for Neosporin for a cut. I wanted him to be comfortable; I wanted him to feel cared for and loved. I tended to him, as I had all year.

Pam kept looking for life-saving interventions. What if he were given a muscle relaxant? Why won't the doctor give it to him? With her questions she kept battering

at his mortality. My intellectualizing, accepting style of grieving was in sharp contrast to her emotional and struggling style. No way was she going to go quiet into that good night. We had to be patient with one another. As the day wore on, she wanted the door closed and the room dark to have focus and privacy. I wanted the door open to have access to light and life. We didn't speak about these contrasts but were very gentle with one another.

I had gathered the family at the beginning of the week to tell them the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance), how they aren't unidirectional steps but that we go back and forth through these stages. We must be patient with one another; there is no right way to do this grieving thing. "Do what you need to do," I encouraged. Acceptance of the process helps to bring about a healthy resolution, I believe. So, when some of us needed to be vigilant and some of us needed to be separate, when some of us needed to fight doctors and some to fight gophers, everything was acceptable. We were ministering to one another, as well as to Grampa, each letting go as best as we knew how.

Grampa ticked along steadily, his numbers not fluctuating. I was so happy all his tubes were out. Now that he didn't *look* so sick, maybe he'd not *be* so sick. Maybe if we reduced his sedation he'd wake up? I guess I was hoping for a last-minute reprieve. But he didn't wake up. I went home for a late morning nap – we were all tired all the time – but when I came back with Gramma, Grampa was worse. His respirations were up. What should we do?

Another decision had to be made.

I'd gone to bed the night before content that we'd taken him off life support, but not off his pacemaker. To do so felt like it would be *taking* his life away, since it had been part of his living for many years. So far, we hadn't been taking his life away, I reasoned, just taking away the artificial help. But now the pacemaker seemed to be part of the artificial help. Every heartbeat on the monitor showed it had been caused by the pacemaker. I reviewed the facts: Grampa wasn't going to get well. Grampa's breathing was loud and raspy, more and more irregular, hard to listen to. We discussed it with the doctor, then Pam and Gramma and I agreed to turn off his pacemaker. Now we were eager to let him go, now that it seemed he struggled. We called Robert and Merie. Did they want to be there when the pacemaker was turned off? They were out of contact for an hour and a half while we sat waiting, watching Grampa's distress. How many ragged breaths could we endure? But then, could we so deliberately turn him off without giving them a chance to come?

Finally, they called in. No, they wanted to just let him go, they'd said their goodbyes. We summoned the doctor. She was at dinner. Another forty-five minutes of tensely waiting. My chest hurt as I heard Grampa struggle for breath. We increased his sedation, they assured us he had no "air hunger," he didn't know what was going on. I learned the names and functions of morphine and fentanyl as we discussed turning up the doses. Increased sedation meant he couldn't cough up the secretions in his lungs, so it became even harder for him to breathe. "It's cruel to make him suffer!" Gramma exclaimed. We reassured her the

nurse said he couldn't feel anything. We suffered through each breath. We waited.

The doctor came and rubbed a ring-shaped magnet over the pacemaker. Grampa's heart raced. We couldn't figure out how to make the pacemaker turn off. Oh my gosh, I don't know how much more of this drama I can take! I stepped outside the curtain to call Robert. "Look in Grampa's wallet. What is the make and brand and serial number of Grampa's pacemaker?" I scribbled numbers on the back of a hospital Kleenex box and handed the box to the doctor. She called the manufacturer, then the manufacturer's local representative, who said she had a special wand to turn it off, but she couldn't be at the hospital until the next morning. The doctor left us to attend to her patient in the Emergency Department. We sat there stunned.

I watched the monitor. His breathing, which had been up to 45 breaths earlier, was down to twelve a minute. But his oxygen saturation was still at 82. How could that be? When Gramma and Grampa had first come to live with me, not knowing anything about old age and what to expect, I'd gotten a book from the library, *How We Die*. It had explained that we die from lack of oxygen. If oxygen doesn't get to our cells, they can't function, cells shut down, tissues shut down, organs shut down, the body stops. Why was his oxygen saturation still so high if he was hardly breathing?

Pam suddenly grabbed our hands and began to pray over him. I had a sense of angels hovering close, ready to take him to Glory. Expecting to feel sad, I felt suddenly

joyful for him, the healthy youthfulness he was about to enjoy, the bliss of Heaven, love, and freedom awaiting him.

After our Amen I noticed the thin tube going into his nostrils carrying four liters of oxygen. It had become invisible to me, but now I saw it as the source of what was keeping Grampa from his rest. I asked the nurse to turn off his oxygen. She called the doctor, who said we could try, and if he became uncomfortable, we could turn it back on. The nurse didn't just turn a dial; she removed the tube from his face. What if he needs it again? How scary it was to cut him adrift!

And he was adrift. He quickly began to turn pale, his numbers plummeted, he began to look waxy, his breathing slowed. I realized I had made a third "pull the plug" decision. Yikes. Nine breaths per minute. Six. Long pauses between each breath. Three. A last breath. The monitor said zero. We waited for another breath. And waited. It didn't come.

Robert looked in, said, "I'm leaving now; that's not how I remember him." Pam began battering with questions, "Is he gone? How do we know if he's gone? Does the doctor have to check him?" I wanted silence, reverence. I watched in fascination how this body I'd loved so dearly changed into something foreign. I bundled him in blankets so he wouldn't cool and kept holding his hand. The nurse came in, the doctor came in. "Do you have to listen to his chest or do something procedural?" I asked. "No, it's pretty obvious he's gone." Gramma let go of his hand.

"Take your time," the nurse said, "but I have some papers I need you to sign." It was ten o'clock at night, Saturday, a full week after Grampa had gone to the hospital. Because it was late, I wanted to get Gramma home to bed. As soon as Gramma and Pam were ready, I drove the two of them home. I dropped them off, then returned to the hospital to sign the papers, glancing in the window at Grampa's body, now not wanting to be near it. On the day he had arrived at the ICU, I had seen a sheet-covered corpse wheeled out, and that picture had been approaching for days. Like Robert, I wanted to remember Grampa as I'd known him. I went to the nurses' station.

There are logistics to attend to after someone passes. "We could do a partial autopsy to find out specifically what caused the blockage." No. I knew from our October discussion that Grampa didn't want an autopsy, and I certainly didn't. Did he want to donate organs? I couldn't remember. "Eight years ago, it became federal law that the hospital has to notify the tissue donation network within fifteen minutes of someone's passing. They will call you within the hour to see if he wants to donate his tissue." I haven't figured out how I feel about organ donation, but this thrusting of what felt like a sales call into the middle of our loss felt horribly wrong. I was operating somewhere between dazed and hyper-responsible, so we went on to the next task, calling the mortuary. While the nurse phoned, I sat with her to make sure all the information was correct. The mortuary would pick up the body in the morning from the hospital morgue. Oh, God. I wanted to vomit. I signed my name - and wandered home.

Shortly after I got home – where everyone was awake at 12:15 a.m., for who can sleep after a night like ours? – I got the call from the tissue donation network. "Would you like to make a tissue donation?" I had checked the Advanced Directive from October's sunny patio chat. Yes, Grampa wanted that. "We have to ask you some questions about his health history. It will take about thirty minutes."

I had succumbed to making three major life and death decisions in the past twenty-four hours – removing life support, shutting down the pacemaker, and removing his oxygen – this was just one more obstacle, but it was infuriating to me. I was in the anger stage of grieving. How dare they call, "Would you like to make a donation…?" I briefly pondered a policy battle, how this could be better handled, the pros and cons of organ donation - but I had no fight left in me, and I answered the stranger's questions. Because I didn't know the cause of the dementia diagnosis Grampa had received back in Chicago over a year ago, they wouldn't be able to use his tissue. Grampa would be cremated intact.

This wild ride – intense, suspenseful, jerky, unpredictable, emotional, exhausting – was over. I felt I'd stayed in the saddle: that as awful as this experience was, we had done it pretty well. We had loved Grampa and loved one another, and we would go on doing so. We went to our beds, finally, and he went to his final rest.

AFTERMATH

Grampa went into the hospital by ambulance on Sunday morning; the following Saturday night he passed away. The week spent in the Intensive Care Unit had brought the family from “Please get well and come back to us!” to “Please go and be free of pain!”

By the end of the endless week, we were all exhausted, but we were all in different places with our grief. Robert experienced bouts of fury over “unrelated” incidents and misunderstandings, and he slept a great deal. I continued on caregiver mode. Gramma just wanted to “Go home!” to Illinois whence she’d come exactly one year ago. Pam felt guilt and an urge to make it up to Grampa somehow. Merie said she was “very content in the Land of Denial.”

And so, we moved on. Merie turned 18 – "became an adult!" – on the Friday we decided to take Grampa off life support. She'd already given up a celebratory road trip with friends in order to be at Grampa's bedside. What could be more adult than that? The very definition of maturity is the ability to give up what you want for another's benefit, the ability to sacrifice for love. So, on Merie's birthday, instead of opening her gifts with family surrounding her at the dinner table, we were all in a meeting with the doctor making a very adult decision. I don’t know if I even wished her a Happy Birthday on her special day. But Saturday night after Grampa had passed, after I’d signed the form about what mortuary to use, after I’d talked with

the Organ Donation people, I checked in on her as she sat on the floor in her bedroom. "I'm thinking I'll just open my presents by myself," she said. It sounded like a lonely, solemn way to celebrate, so I ran downstairs and gathered up the silly gifts I'd wrapped for her, and we opened them together. She jokes about becoming a spy, so I gave her an assortment of mustaches. She likes the sense of autonomy and ability that comes with being able to solve problems, so I gave her a colorful assortment of duct tape. We laughed and enjoyed one another, a quiet joy in a stormy week.

Sunday morning Robert wanted to get back to Normal, so we went to church. This was good because it allowed him to tell his story to men, and receive their consolation, while I told mine to my friends. In the evening, we had a low-key birthday dinner for Merie, during which she opened her remaining gifts, followed by a memorial dessert we'd planned. I had made Grampa's favorite dessert, mocha pound cake, which all week we had promised to give him if he would just wake up and come back to us. It was a cake with love and sorrow and guilt mixed in: I didn't make it for him; I only made it after he was gone. We ate it together while looking at a map of the U.S. national parks, reminiscing about trips we'd taken with this gentle, kind, wise, patient man. It wasn't enough sorrow venting for me, but it was all some of us could handle at that time, and it was a sweet, memorable occasion.

On Monday Gramma insisted, "I want to go home!" I got on the computer to find Gramma a place to live back in Illinois. Nothing suited Pam, and she, too, was

eager to get back to Illinois. Robert and I tried to dissuade her. "Don't take Gramma home until you have a home to take her to. You, Pam, need a rest. Stay here a few weeks, learn to care for Gramma in a context where it will be easy for you." Pam seemed a little out of focus and out of step with the rest of us who were in organizational mode – caring for details, emptying closets, making phone calls. So, on Tuesday I took Pam to the beach. She talked the whole way there, I bought her coffee and a Danish, and we sat on the beach sipping and munching, and talked some more. Then we each took a solitary walk for an hour before driving home.

Once home, I went for a nap and, unbeknownst to me, Pam made plane reservations. When I awoke for dinner, Pam announced she and Gramma would leave the next morning.

There are things I can influence and things I can control, and it annoyed me that this departure – a sudden second loss for me – was so *not* what I wanted. Pam planned to house Gramma in a Holiday Inn until she had a bed in the condo for Gramma. The condo was filled with boxes and no furniture. It was accessed by the stairs that had made their move to California necessary in the first place. The chaos made my blood boil, but I relinquished this whole scenario. When there are multiple decision-makers, there will be differences in how decisions are made. The matter was now out of my hands. Setting aside what I could not do, I tackled what I could. It was my job to make this transition as easy as possible for Gramma and Pam, so I worked on packing.

Pam decided to bring both walkers, both wheelchairs, the power chair Gramma had never used, *all* the belongings back to Illinois, except for Grampa's clothes and his pencil cup. The pencil cup and its contents would go to his grandchildren – a very tidy though paltry leftover from a very tidy life. Grampa had never been given to excesses. I collected into a folder the documents Pam would need for the plane; I organized a carry-on bag, counted out thirteen pieces of luggage plus Gramma that Pam would take with her, and loaded everything into the van. Early Wednesday morning, not four days after Grampa had passed, Pam and Gramma were gone. It was a shock.

Easing the emptiness, just a few hours after we returned from taking Pam and Gramma to the airport, my cousin arrived from Germany for an overnight with her daughter Merie's age. We jerked into hospitality mode, eating out, making up beds, socializing pleasantly, stifling our grief. On Friday we had a conference call with Pam and Gramma and the attorney. Grampa had planned everything to pass into Pam's hand for managing finances for Gramma's care. No big revelations.

On Saturday I left for a long-planned trip to the east coast to visit my family. After a loving reception, a barbeque on the farm with my daughter and her cousins, with their grandparents and my siblings and a horse and a dog on a beautiful summer day, I went to bed. And slept for 36 hours.

After my long sleep, I resolved to get up and be sociable again – but that was not to be. Picking up the bathmat after my shower, my back went out in a zing of excruciating pain; I fainted. I spent the rest of the week coddling myself. I went from being the caregiver to the caregivee, since I couldn't even turn in bed without large doses of wine and Advil, and I needed my mother's help in getting up and getting dressed. I found I didn't want to be with anyone just yet anyway. I hadn't been alone in the house for a year, and to be solitary was a rich treat. My body circumvented my sense of social obligations, and I spent time alone.

And so, we move on. My body aches and my dreams are filled with looking for Grampa, coffins, hospital beds, and searching for medicine. When I awake, the memory of my dreams makes me cry, the sorrow comes to the surface for a moment. The remainder of the day I rest in the sun or go for slow walks. Each of us struggles in our own way to find peace and resolution and comfort. I rely heavily on my family and friends and faith. This part of my journey with Gramma and Grampa, *this sliver of time* I've had with them, is bittersweet, full of memories and longings and hopes.

Thank you for walking this journey with me.

POSTSCRIPT

SANDWICHED BETWEEN THE PROMISE AND THE GLORY

Last evening we had an early rain. From inside the house, I noticed the light was unusual; the sky was lit up in such a way that caused me to peer out the window to see what was up. Sure enough, there was a full rainbow in the east. I called to my family, and we rushed outside to look at it. It was, in fact, a double rainbow, sharp and clear and beautiful. Then we looked to the west, and the misty sky was in a diaphanous yellow glow, all alight with the setting sun. It was a different glory, more ethereal and beautiful even than the rainbows. Which way to turn? Both views couldn't be seen at once, so we ping-ponged our gaze from one marvel to the other in order to soak up all the wonder. As thrilling as a double rainbow is, it was the shining light that held our attention more, as it had a greater degree of glory.

A rainbow is a symbol of God's promise. "I have set my rainbow in the clouds," God says in Genesis, "and it will be the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth." In the other direction, the glow from the sunset looked like nothing so much as Heaven – the sort of glimpse that reassures and makes one eager for eternity. There my little family stood in the rain, under dark and heavy clouds, sandwiched in between God's promise for

earth and His promise of Heaven. Just where we always are.

With so much glory all around us, we did not mind the rain: we danced and sang in it, and we celebrated with the neighbors who also came out to enjoy the spectacular beauty. Some people took a quick glance at the rainbow, then headed back indoors to more pressing matters. I was astonished that one lady walking her dog took the opportunity of encountering us to completely ignore the celestial show and instead complain about the new paint job on her house!

The setting was a picture that I can hold in me, parable-like, whenever I get too focused on the heavy clouds over my head: they are only a small part of the story. Also, the many ways people responded to the grace of beauty that was bestowed on us reminds me of the choices I have. How foolish I am when I focus on my busyness and complaints, ignoring the gifts that encompass me. That spectacular evening reminds me to look up, to remember the promises and to celebrate the glory, the glory where Grampa dwells with God.

And we all, who with unveiled faces are beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same Image, from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord, who is Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:18

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